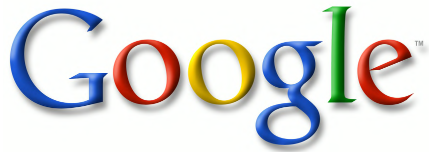

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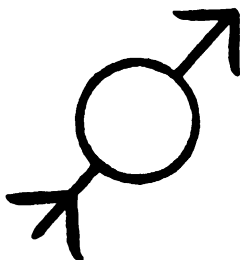

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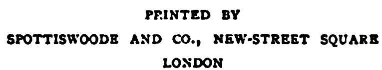
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THE

TALK OF THE TOWN

BY

JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF

'LOST SIR MASSINGBERD' 'BY PROXY' &c.

A NEW EDITION

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN.

CHAPTER I.

AUNT MARGARET.

When I was a very young man nothing used to surprise me more than the existence of a very old one—one of those patriarchs who, instead of linking the generations 'each with each,' include two or three in their protracted span; a habit which runs in families, as in the case of the old gentleman of our own time whose grandsire (once or twice 'removed,' it is true, but not nearly so often as 'by rights' he should have been) gathered the arrows upon Flodden Field. Such persons seemed to me little inferior in interest to ghosts (whom indeed in appearance they greatly resembled), and I was wont to listen to their experiences of the past with the same rapt attention (unalloyed by the alarm) that I should have paid to a denizen of another world. There are, it seems to me, very few old persons about now, absolutely none (there used to be plenty) three or four times my age; and this, perhaps, renders the memory (for she did die at last) of my great-aunt Margaret a thing so rare and precious to me.

She was born, as we, her young relatives, were wont to say, 'ages and ages ago,' but as a matter of fact just one age ago; that is to say, if she had been alive but a few years back, she would have been exactly one hundred years

old. Think of it, my young friends who are about to be so good, in your turn, as to give her story your attention —think of it having been possible that you yourselves should have met this very personage in the flesh (though the poor dear had but little of it)—you perhaps in your goat carriage, upon the King's Parade, Brighton, and she in her wheeled chair—the two extremities (on wheels) of human life!

To things you have read of as history, matters as dead and gone to you, if not quite so old, as the Peloponnesian war, she was a living witness. She was alive, for example, though not of an age to 'take notice' of the circumstances, when the independence of America was acknowledged by the mother country, and when England was beginning to solace herself for that disruption by the acquisition of India. If Aunt Margaret did not know as much about Hyder Ali as became a contemporary, with matters nearer home, such as the loss of the 'Royal George,' 'with all her crew (or nearly so) complete,' she was very conversant. 'I saw it,' she was used to say, 'with my own eyes;' and it was only by the strictest cross-examination that you could get her to confess that she was but a child in arms when that catastrophe took place. As to politics, indeed, though we were at war with everybody in those times, the absence of special correspondents, telegraphs, and even newspapers, made public matters of much more limited interest than it is nowadays easy to imagine. Aunt Margaret, at all events, cared almost nothing about them, with the exception of the doings of the pressgang—an institution of which she always spoke with the liveliest horror. On some one, however, chancing to say in her hearing (and by way of corroboration of her views) that it was marvellous how men who had been so infamously treated should have been got to fight under the national flag, she let fly at him like the broadside of a seventy-gun frigate, and gave him to understand that the sailors of those days had never had *their* equals. On that, as on all other subjects, she exercised *the right of criticism* upon the institutions of her time to

an unlimited extent, but if they were attacked by others she became their defender.

Her chief concern, however, was with social matters, when speaking of which she seemed entirely to forget the age in which she was living: it was as though some ancestress, in hoop and farthingale, had stepped down from her picture and read us a page of the diary she had written overnight. She seemed hardly like one of ourselves at all, though it was obvious enough that she was of the female gender, from the prominence she gave to the topic of costumes. She confessed that she preferred the hair 'undressed'—a phrase which misled her more youthful hearers, who imagined her to be praising a dissolute luxuriance of love-locks, which was very far from her intention; on the other hand, she lamented the disuse of black satin breeches, which she ascribed to the general decay of limb among the male sex. There was nothing like your top-boots and hessians, she would say, for morning wear, but in the evening, every man that had a leg was, in her opinion, bound to show it.

I have reason to believe that my Aunt Margaret was the last person who ever journeyed from London to Brighton in a post-chaise—a mode of travel, she was wont to remark, justly eulogised by the wisest and best of men and Londoners. If he had been spared to see a railway locomotive, she expressed herself as confident that he would have considered it the direct offspring of the devil; and that conjectural opinion of the great lexicographer she herself shared to her dying day. Like him, she was a Londoner, and took an immense interest, not municipal of course, but social, in the affairs of the great city. 'My dear,' she often used to say, reprovingly, when speaking of some event of which I was obliged to confess I had never so much as heard, 'it was the topic of every tongue.'

Although she had never been the theme of London gossip herself, she had been very closely connected with one who had been; and to those who were intimate with her he was the constant subject of her discourse. Her

thoughts dwelt more with him, I am sure, than with all the other personages together with whom she had been acquainted during her earthly pilgrimage; and yet she always thought of him in his adolescence, as a very young man.

'He was just your age, my dear,' she was wont to say to me, 'when he became the "Talk of the Town."'

Perhaps this circumstance gave him an additional interest in my eyes; but certainly her account of this one famous personage was more interesting to me than everything else which Aunt Margaret had to tell me. It has dwelt in my mind for many a year, and when this is the case with any story, I have generally found that I have been able to interest others in its recital. In this particular case, however, my way is not so plain as usual. The story is not *my* story, nor even Aunt Margaret's; in its more important details it is common property. On the other hand, not even the oldest inhabitant has any remembrance of it. The hearts that were once wounded to the quick by the occurrences which I am about to describe can be no more pained by any allusion to them; they have long been dust. No relative, to my knowledge, is now living of the unfortunate young man whose memory —execrated by the crowd—was kept so green and fresh (watered by her tears) by one living soul for nearly eighty years. Why should I not tell his 'pitiful story'?

A second question, however, presents itself at the outset concerning him. Shall I give or conceal his name? I here frankly confess that in its broad details the tale has no novelty to recommend it: it is not only true, but it has been told. The bald, bare facts have been put before the public by the youth himself nearly a hundred years since. There is the rub. To a few 'persons of culture,' as the phrase goes nowadays, the main incident of his career will be familiar; though, however cultured, it is unlikely they will know how it affected my great-aunt Margaret; but to tens of thousands (including, I'll be bound, the upper ten) it will be utterly unknown.

Now I have noticed that there is nothing your well-

informed person so much delights in as to make other people aware of his being so. Indeed, the chief use of information in his eyes is not so much to raise oneself above the crowd (though a sense of elevation is agreeable), as to have the privilege of imparting it to others with a noble air of superiority and self-importance. I will therefore call my hero by such a name as will at once be recognised by the learned, whom I shall thus render my intermediaries—exponents of the transparent secret to those who are in blissful ignorance of it. I will call him William Henry Erin.

I must add in justice to myself that the story was not told me in confidence.

How could it be so when at the very beginning of our intimacy the narrator had already almost reached the extreme limit of human life, while I had but just left school? It was the similarity of age on my part with that of the person she had in her mind which no doubt, in part at least, caused her to make me the repository of her long-buried sorrow. She judged, and rightly judged, that for that reason I was more likely to sympathise with it. Indeed, whenever she spoke of it I forgot her age; as in the case of the pictured grandmamma so felicitously described by Mr. Locker, I used to think of her at such times—

> As she looked at seventeen
> As a bride.
>
> Her rounded form was lean,
> And her silk was bombazine,
> Well I wot.
> With her needles she would sit,
> And for hours would she knit,
> Would she not?
>
> Ah, perishable clay!
> Her charms had dropped away,
> One by one.

Yet when she spoke of the lover of her youth, there seemed nothing incongruous in her so doing. I forgot the *Long Ago in which* her tale was placed; her talk, indeed,

on those occasions being of those human feelings which are independent of any epoch, took little or no colour from the past; it seemed to me a story of to-day, and as such I now relate it.

CHAPTER II.

OUT IN THE COLD.

A FEW years ago it would have been almost impossible for modern readers to imagine what a coach journey used to be in the good old times; but, thanks to certain gilded youths, more fortunate than persons of a higher intellectual type who have striven in vain to—

> Revive old usages thoroughly worn out,
> The souls of them fumed forth, the hearts of them torn out,

it is not now so difficult. Any one who has gone by one of our 'summer coaches' for a short trip out of town can picture the 'Rockets' and 'Highflyers' in which our ancestors took their journeys at the end of the last century. Those old mail-coaches were, in fact, their very counterparts; for the 'basket' had already made way for 'the hind seat;' only, instead of our aristocratic driver, there was a professional 'whip,' who in fair weather came out in scarlet like the guard, though in wet and winter time he was wrapt in heavy drab, as though a butterfly should become a grub again. The roads were good, the milestones in a much better condition than they are at present, and the inns at which the passengers stopped for refreshments greatly superior to their successors, or rather to their few ghastly survivors, all room and no company, which still haunt the roadside. The highwaymen, too, were still extant, which gave an opportunity to young gentlemen of spirit to assure young female fellow-passengers of their being under safe escort, if not of displaying their own courage. Still, after eight hours in a stage-coach, most

'insides' felt that they had had enough of it, and were glad enough to stretch their legs when the chance offered.

This feeling was experienced by two out of the three passengers in the London coach 'Tantivy,' which on a certain afternoon in May, at the end of the last century, drew up at the 'White Hart,' in the town of Banbury: it was their last 'stopping stage' before they arrived at their destination—Stratford-on-Avon; and they wished (at least two of them did) that they had reached it already.

Mr. Samuel Erin, the senior and head of the little party, was a man of about sixty years of age, but looked somewhat older. He still wore the attire which had been usual in his youth, but was now pronounced old-fashioned: a powdered wig of moderate dimensions; a plain braided frock coat, with waistcoat to match, almost as long; a hat turned up before and behind, and looking like a cross between a cocked hat and the head-gear of a modern archdeacon; knee-breeches, and buckled shoes. Upon his forehead—their ordinary resting-place when he was not engaged in his profession (that of a draughtsman), or poring over some musty volume—reposed, on a bed of wrinkles, a pair of gold spectacles. His eyes, which, without being very keen, were intelligent enough, appeared smaller than they really were, from a habit he had of puckering their lids, engendered by the more delicate work of his calling, and also by frequent examination of old MSS. and rare editions, of which he was a connoisseur.

As he left the coach with slow, inelastic step, he was followed by his friend Frank Dennis. This gentleman was a much younger man, but he too, though not so retrograde in attire as his senior, paid little attention to the prevailing fashion. He wore, indeed, his own hair, but closely cut; a pepper-and-salt coat and waistcoat, and a neckcloth, that looked like a towel, tied carelessly under his chin. Though not in his first youth, he was still a young man, with frank and comely features; but an expression habitually thoughtful, and a somewhat slow delivery of what he had to say,

made him appear of maturer years than belonged to him. He was an architect by profession, but had some private means; his tastes were somewhat similar to those of his friend and neighbour Erin, and he could better afford to indulge them. His present expedition was no business of his own, but undertaken, as he professed, that he might enjoy the other's society for a week or two in the country. It so happened, however, that Mr. Erin was bringing his niece, Miss Margaret Slade, with him; and, to judge by the tenderness of Mr. Dennis's glance when it rested on her, it is probable that the prospect of her companionship had had some attraction for him.

Last of the three, she tripped out of the coach, declining, with a pretty toss of her head, the assistance the younger man would have rendered her in alighting. She could trip and toss her head like any fairy. No tower of hair 'like a porter's knot set upon end' had she; her dress, though to modern eyes very short-waisted, was not, as an annalist of her time has described it, 'drawn exceeding close over stays drawn still closer;' her movements were light and free. Her lustrous brown hair fell in natural waves from under a beaver hat turned up on the left side, and ornamented with one grey feather. A grey silk spencer indicated, under pretence of concealing—for it was summer weather, and she could not have worn it for warmth—the graces of her form. Her eyes were bright and eager, and her pretty lips murmured a sigh of relief, as she touched ground, at her release from durance.

'How I wish this was Stratford-on-Avon!' cried she naïvely.

'That would be wishing that Shakespeare had been born at Banbury,' said her uncle, in a tone of reproof.

'Banbury is it?' she said; 'then this is where the lady lived who went about with rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, and therefore had music wherever she goes—I mean went.'

Mr. Dennis smiled, and murmured very slowly that other young ladies brought music with them without the

instruments of which she spoke, or indeed any instruments; they had only to open their mouths.

'I am hungry,' observed Miss Margaret, without any reference to that remark about opening her mouth at all—in fact, she studiously ignored it.

Mr. Dennis sighed.

He was that minority of one who would rather have remained in the coach—that is, if Miss Margaret had done likewise; he would not in the least have objected to Mr. Samuel Erin getting out. A circumstance over which he had no control, the fact of his having been born half a century too early, prevented his being acquainted with the poem in which Mr. Thomas Moore describes the pleasure he felt in travelling in a stage-coach with a fair companion; but he had experienced it all the same. He was not displeased that there was another stage to come yet.

If he was satisfied, however, with the opportunities that had been afforded to him of making himself agreeable to Miss Margaret on the road, he must have been a man thankful for small mercies. She had given him very little encouragement. His attempts to engage her in conversation had been anything but successful. When a young lady wishes to be tender, we know that the mere offer to open or shut a coach window for her may lead to volumes of small-talk, but nothing had come of his little politenesses beyond the bare acknowledgment of them. Even that, however, was something. An 'I thank you, sir,' from the pretty lips of Margaret Slade was to Mr. Frank Dennis more than the acceptance of plan, elevation, and section of any proposed town-hall from a municipal council. It is strange how much harder is the heart of the female than the male under certain circumstances. If a young lady obviously endeavours to make herself agreeable to a young gentleman, he never repulses her, or at least I have never known an instance of it. 'But suppose,' I hear some fair one inquire, 'he should be engaged to be married to some one else?' 'Madam,' I reply to that imaginary questioner, '*it would not make* one halfpennyworth of difference. If

the other young woman was not there, you would never guess from his behaviour that she was in existence.'

It must not, however, be concluded from this observation that Miss Margaret Slade was in love with anybody else. She was but seventeen at most; an age at which among well-conducted young persons no such idea enters the head, nor indeed, in her case, as one would think, had there been any opportunity for its entrance. She had been brought up in the country in seclusion, and only a few months ago, upon the death of Mrs. Erin, had been sent for by her uncle to keep house for him. His establishment in Norfolk Street, Strand, was a very simple one, and the company he entertained numbered none of those who, in the language of the day, were called 'the votaries of Cupid.' No young beaux ever so much as crossed the threshold. Mr. Erin's visitors were all grave elderly gentlemen, more interested in a binding than in a petticoat, and preferring some old-world volume to a maiden in her spring-time. There was indeed, 'though,' as the song says, 'it is hardly worth while to put that in,' a son of Mr. Erin's, of her own age, who dwelt in his father's house. But the young man was out all day engaged in his professional avocation—that of a conveyancer's clerk; and even when he returned at eve, mixed but little with the family. It seemed to Margaret that his father did not treat him very kindly.

There had been only one mention of him in the long coach journey from town. Mr. Dennis, addressing himself as usual to Margaret, when a chance offered of interrupting Mr. Erin's interminable talk upon antiquarian subjects, had inquired after her cousin William Henry; and she had replied, with the least rose tint of a blush, that he had gone, she believed, on some business of his employer to Bristol. A statement which her uncle had corroborated, adding drily, 'The boy has asked to have his holiday with us now instead of later in the year, so I have told him to come on to Stratford; he may be useful to me in collecting information upon Shakespearean matters.'

The remark scarcely breathed the spirit of a doating parent, but then that was not Mr. Erin's way.

'Your son has made a good choice of locality,' said Mr. Dennis, in his rather ponderous manner. 'It is not every young fellow who would choose Stratford-on-Avon to disport himself in, in preference to Tunbridge Wells, for instance; his taste for antiquities is certainly most remarkable. He will prove a chip of the old block, I'll warrant,' he added, with a sidelong smile at Margaret. Margaret did not return his smile, though she did not frown as her uncle did. The fact was, though neither Margaret nor Mr. Dennis had the faintest idea of it, the latter could hardly have paid the old gentleman a more objectionable compliment.

'I do not think,' he replied coldly, after an unpleasant pause, 'that William Henry cares much about Shakespeare; but he has probably asked for his holiday thus early, in hopes that, by hook or by crook, he may get another one later on.'

To this there was no reply from either quarter. Mr. Dennis, though a good-natured fellow enough, did not feel called upon to defend William Henry's want of Shakespearean feeling against his parent, while Miss Margaret not only closed her mouth, but shut her eyes. If she slept, to judge by the expression of her face she had pleasant dreams; but it is possible she was only pretending to sleep, in order to chew the cud of some sweet thought at greater leisure. She disagreed with her uncle about the motive that was bringing William Henry to Stratford, but was quite content to accept the fact—of which she had previously been ignorant—without debate. She herself did not, I fear, care so much about Shakespeare as it behoved Mr. Samuel Erin's niece to do; but from henceforth she looked forward with greater pleasure than she had done to this visit to his birthplace. Hungry as she had professed herself to be, she would no doubt have done justice to the ample, if somewhat solid, viands that were set before the coach passengers, and on which her uncle exercised his

knife and fork like a man who knows he will be charged the same whether he eats much or little, but for an unlooked-for circumstance.

Hardly had the meal commenced when the cheerful note of the horn announced the approach of a coach from some other quarter, the tenants of which presently crowded into the common dining-room. Among them was a young gentleman who, without a glance at beef or pasty, at once made up to our party of three.

His first salutation, contrary to the laws of etiquette, was made to Mr. Erin.

'Hollo!' said that gentleman, unwillingly relinquishing his knife and holding out two fingers to the new-comer, 'what brings *you* here, sir?'

'The Banbury coach, sir. I came across country from Bristol in the hopes of catching you at this stage, which I have fortunately succeeded in doing.'

'Humph! it seems to me you must have come miles out of the way; however, since you *are* here, you had better set-to on the victuals and save your supper at Stratford.'

Mr. Dennis shook hands with the young man cordially enough, and recommended the meat pie.

Miss Margaret just lifted her eyes from her plate and gave him a smile of welcome, but at the same time she moved a little towards the top of the table, so as to leave a space for him on the other side of her, an invitation which he lost no time in accepting.

A scornful poet, whose appetite was considerably jaded, has expressed his disgust at seeing women eat; but women, I have noticed, take great pleasure in seeing men, for whom they have any regard, relish a hearty meal. The new-comer ate as only a young gentleman who has travelled for hours on a coach-top can eat, and Margaret so enjoyed the spectacle that she neglected her own opportunities in that way, to watch him. 'The ardour with which you attack that veal, Willie,' she whispered slily, 'reminds me of the Prodigal Son after his diet of husks.'

'Did you think the manner in which my arrival was

welcomed in other respects, Maggie,' he inquired bitterly, 'carried out the parable?'

'Never mind; you are out for your holiday, remember, and must only think of enjoying yourself.'

'Well, I hope *you* are glad to see me, at all events.'

'Well, of course I am; it's a very unexpected pleasure.'

'Is it? I should have thought you might have guessed that I should have managed to join you somehow.'

'I have not your genius for plots and strategies, Willie; it is so great that it sometimes a little alarms me,' she answered gravely.

'The weak must take up such weapons as lay to their hand,' he replied drily.

This conversation, carried on as it was in a low tone, was drowned by the clatter of knives and forks; before the latter had ceased the notes of the horn were once more heard, the signal for the resumption of their journey.

The party rose at once, Mr. Erin leading the way. He took no notice of his son as he pushed by him, but the neglect was more than compensated for by the attention of the female members of the company.

William Henry was a very comely young fellow; his complexion dark, but not swarthy; his eyes keen and bright; a profusion of black curling hair was tied by a ribbon under his hat, which gave him a somewhat feminine appearance, though it was not unusual so to wear it; his attire, though neat, was far from foppish—a dark blue coat with a short light waistcoat; a neckcloth by no means so large as was worn by many young persons in his station of life; and nankeen breeches.

If it is difficult for us to suppose such a costume becoming, it was easy for those who were accustomed to it to think so. His figure, it was observed, as he walked rapidly to overtake his father, was especially good.

'I have made inquiries, Mr. Erin,' he said respectfully, as the old man placed his foot on the step, 'and find there is plenty of room in the coach.'

'*You mean on the* coach,' was the dry reply; 'surely

a young man like you—leaving out of question the ridiculous extravagance of such a proceeding—would never wish to be an inside passenger on an afternoon like this.' And with a puff, half of displeasure, half of exhaustion, caused by the effort of the ascent, the antiquary sank into his seat.

'Do you not ride with us?' inquired Mr. Dennis good-naturedly, as he came up to the door with Margaret upon his arm.

The young man's cheeks flushed with anger.

'You do not know William Henry,' said the girl, interposing with a smile; 'he does not care for the nest when he can sit upon the bough.'

'It is pleasanter outside—for some things—no doubt,' assented Mr. Dennis as he assisted her into the coach. She cast a sympathising glance over her shoulder at William Henry, as he swung himself up to the hind seat, and he returned it with a grateful look. She had saved him from a humiliation.

It was a warm evening, as his father had observed, but in one sense he had been turned out into the cold, and he felt it bitterly.

CHAPTER III.

A RECITATION.

There is one spot, and only one, in all England, which can in any general sense be called hallowed—sacred to the memory of departed man. Priests and kings have done their best for other places, with small effect; here and there, as in Westminster Abbey, an attempt has been made to make sacred soil by collecting together the bones of our greatest men—warriors, authors, divines, statesmen; but these various elements do not kindly mix; the devotion we would pay to our own particular idol is chilled perhaps by the neighbourhood of those with whom we feel no

especial sympathy. In all cathedrals, too, there is a certain religious feeling, artificial as the light which finds its way through the 'prophets blazoned on its panes;' it is difficult in them to feel enthusiasm. In other places, again, exposed to the free air of heaven, association is weakened by external influences. I, at least, only know of one place where Nature, as it were, effaces herself, and becomes the setting and framework to the epitaph of a dead man. It is Stratford-on-Avon.

There, save once a year, when Shakespeare's birthday is commemorated, fashion brings but few persons to simulate admiration. It is not as at some great funeral, where curiosity or official position or other extraneous motive brings men together to do honour to the departed; they come like humble friends, to pay tribute to one whom they not only admire, but revere, to this little Warwickshire town. It is too remote from the places where men congregate to entice the thoughtless crowd; nor has it any attractions save its associations with that marvellous mind, of which the crowd has but a vague and cold conception. It is, to my poor thinking, a very comfortable sign of the advance of human intelligence that, year after year, in hundreds and in thousands, but not in crowds—for they arrive alone, or in twos or threes together—there come, from the uttermost parts of our island, and even from the ends of the earth, more and more pilgrims to this simple shrine.

In the days of which I write, Stratford, of course, had far fewer visitors than at present; but those it did have were certainly not inferior in enthusiasm. Indeed, it was a time when Shakespeare, if not more read than now, was certainly more talked about and thought about. His plays were much oftener acted. The theatre occupied a more intellectual position in society. Kemble and his majestic sister, Mrs. Siddons, trod the boards; quotations from Shakespeare were as common in the mouths of clerks and counter-jumpers as are now the most taking rhymes from a *favourite burlesque;* even the paterfamilias who did not

'hold by' stage plays made an exception in honour of the Bard of Avon. In literary circles an incessant war was waging concerning him; pamphlet after pamphlet—attack and rejoinder—was published almost every week by this or that partisan of a phrase, or discoverer of a new reading. Mr. Samuel Erin was in the fore-front of this contest, and, as a rule, a stickler for the text. He opposed the advocates for change in the same terms which Dr. Johnson used to reformers in politics. The devil, he was wont to say, was the first commentator. The famous Shakespearean critic Malone was the object of his special aversion, which was most cordially reciprocated, and often had they transfixed one another with pens dipped in gall.

It was curious, since the object of Mr. Erin's adoration has taken such pains to instil gentleness and feeling among his fellow-creatures, that his disciple should have harboured the sentiments he sometimes expressed; and yet it is hardly to be wondered at when one remembers that the advocates of Christianity itself have fallen into the same error, and from the same cause. Mr. Samuel Erin was not only a devotee, but a fanatic.

As the coach crossed the river, near their journey's end, Mr. Dennis broke a long silence by a reference to the beauty of the scenery, which his friend had come professionally to illustrate.

'Here is a pretty bit of river for your pencil, Mr. Erin.'

'Hush! hush!' rejoined that gentleman reprovingly; 'it is the Avon. We are on the threshold of his very birthplace.'

It was on the tip of Mr. Dennis's tongue, who had been thinking of nothing but Margaret for the last half-hour, to inquire, 'Whose birthplace?'—which would have lost him the other's friendship for ever. Fortunately he recollected himself (and Shakespeare) just in time, and in some trepidation at his narrow escape, which his friend took for reverential awe, murmured some more suitable reply.

William Henry, on the other hand, was not so fortunate. At the instigation of the guard (who had a commission from the innkeeper on the guests he brought him), he leant down from the coach-top to inquire which house Mr. Erin meant to patronise, suggesting that the party should put up at the 'Stratford Arms,' as being the best accommodation.

'You fool!' roared the old gentleman; 'we put up at the "Falcon," of course. The idea,' he continued indignantly, 'of our going elsewhere, when the opportunity is afforded us of residing under the very roof which once sheltered our immortal bard!'

'Shakespeare did not live in an inn, did he, uncle?' inquired Margaret demurely. She knew perfectly well that he had not done so, but was unwilling to let this outburst against her cousin pass by without some kind of protest.

'Well, no,' admitted Mr. Erin; 'but he lived just opposite to it, and, it is supposed—indeed, it may be reasonably concluded—that he patronised it for his—ahem—convivial entertainments.'

'I suppose there is some foundation for the story of the "Topers" and the "Sippers,"' observed Dennis, 'and for the bard being found under the crab-tree *vino et somno.*'

'There may be, there may be,' returned the other indifferently; 'but as for Shakespeare being beaten, even in a contest of potations, that is entirely out of the question. It was not in the nature of the man. If he ran, he would run quickest; if he jumped, he would jump the highest; and if he drank, he would undoubtedly have drunk deeper than anybody else.'

The 'Falcon' Inn had no great extent of accommodation—it was perhaps too full of 'association' for it—but Margaret had a neat chamber enough; and, since it looked on the Guild Chapel and Grammar School where Shakespeare had been educated, and on the walls which surrounded the spot where he had spent his latter days, the

niece of her uncle could hardly have anything to complain of. The young men had an attic apiece. As to what sort of a room was assigned to Mr. Samuel Erin, he could not have told you himself, for he took no notice of it. His head was always out of the window. It was his first sight of the shrine of his idol, and the very air seemed to be laden with incense from it.

To think that that long, low tenement yonder, with the projecting front, was the very house in which Shakespeare had 'crept unwillingly to school,' that his young feet had helped to wear those very stones away, and that that ancient archway had echoed his very tones, sent a thrill of awe through him such as could only be compared with that felt by some mediæval beholder of 'a bit of the true cross.' But, in that case, faith—and a good deal of it—had been essential to conviction; whereas in this the facts were indisputable. Behind yonder walls, too, stood the house to which, full of honour though not of years, he had retired to spend that leisure in old age which he had desiderated more than most men.

> The aim of all is but to crown the life
> With honour, wealth, and ease in waning age,

were the words Mr. Erin repeated to himself with mystic devotion, as a peasant mutters a Latin prayer. He had no poetic gifts himself, nor was he even a critic in a high sense; but his long application to Shakespearean literature had given him some reflected light. What he understood of it he understood thoroughly; what was too high for his moderate, though by no means dwarfish intelligence, to grasp, or what through intermediate perversion was unintelligible, he not only took on trust, but accepted as reverentially as did those who were wont to consult her, the utterances of the Sibyl. In literature we have few such fanatics as Samuel Erin now; but in art he has many modern parallels—men who, having once convinced themselves that a painting is by Rubens or Titian, will see in it

a hundred merits where there are not half a dozen, and even discover beauties in its spots and blemishes.

While the head of the little party was thus in the seventh heaven of happiness above-stairs, the junior members of it had assembled together in the common sitting-room; the landlady had inquired what refreshments they would please to have, and tea had been ordered rather with a view of putting a stop to her importunities than because, after that ample meal at Banbury, they stood in need of any food.

'If your uncle were here, Maggie,' said William Henry, not perhaps without some remembrance of the snubbing he had just received from the old gentleman, and from which he was still smarting, 'he would be ordering "sherrie sack," or "cakes and ale."'

Margaret glanced at him reprovingly, but said nothing. She regretted that he took such little pains to bridge the breach that evidently existed between his father and himself, and always discouraged his pert sallies. William Henry hung his head: if he did not find sympathy with his cousin, he could, he thought, find it nowhere.

Frank Dennis, however, came to his rescue. He either did not look upon the penniless, friendless lad as a real rival, or he was very magnanimous.

'And how did you enjoy your trip to Bristol?' he inquired. 'St. Mary Redcliffe is a fine church, is it not?'

'Yes, indeed; I paid a visit to the turret, where the papers were stored to which Chatterton had access, and from which he drew the Rowley poems.'

'How interesting!' exclaimed Margaret; it was plain by her tone that she wanted to make amends to the young fellow. 'Are any of his people still at Bristol?'

'Oh yes, his sister lives there, a Mrs. Newton. I had a great deal of talk with her. She told me how angry he was with her on one occasion when she cut up some old deeds and other things he had brought home with him, and which she had *thought* valueless, to make into thread-

papers; he collected them together, thread-papers and all, and carried them into his own room.'

'Considering the use the poor young fellow made of them,' observed Dennis gravely, 'she had better have burnt them.'

'Still, they did give him a certain spurious immortality,' put in Margaret pitifully. 'The other was out of his reach.'

'Surely, my dear Miss Slade, you cannot mean that?' remonstrated Dennis gently.

'At all events, everybody was very hard upon him just because they were taken in,' argued Margaret. 'If he had acknowledged what they admired so much to have been his own, they would have seen nothing in it to admire. I think Horace Walpole behaved like a brute.'

'That is very true,' admitted Dennis. 'Still, the lad was a forger.'

'People are not starved to death, as *he* was, even for forging,' rejoined Margaret. 'His own people, too, did not care about him. He had no friends, poor fellow.'

Dennis listened to her with pleasure—though he thought her too lenient—because she took the side of the oppressed William Henry was even more grateful, because he secretly compared his own position with that of Chatterton—for *he* too had written poems which nobody thought much of—and guessed that Margaret had his own case in her eye.

'Amongst other things that Mrs. Newton told me,' continued William Henry, 'was that her brother was very reserved and fond of seclusion. On one occasion he was most severely chastised for having absented himself for half a day from home. He did not shed a tear, but only observed that it was hard indeed to be whipped for reading.'

'It was certainly most unfortunate,' admitted Dennis, 'that the boy was amongst persons who did not understand him.'

'And who, though they were his own flesh and blood,

treated him with contempt and cruelty,' added Margaret, with indignation. 'Did this sister of his never give him credit for possessing talent even?'

'She thought him odd as a child, it seems,' answered William Henry. 'He preferred to be taught his letters from an old black-letter Bible rather than from any book of modern type. He seems to have had a natural leaning for the line that he took in life.'

'In other words, you think he was born with a turn for forgery,' observed Dennis drily. 'That is not a very high compliment to him, nor indeed to Providence either.'

'But how else could he have become celebrated?' argued the young man impatiently.

'Is it necessary then, my lad, to become celebrated?' inquired Dennis smiling.

'I don't say necessary, but it must be very nice.'

'The same thing may be said of most of our vices,' answered the other reprovingly. Frank Dennis often spoke the words of wisdom, but spoke them cut and dried, like proverbs from a copy-book. He was an excellent fellow, but not quite human enough for ordinary use. Margaret would have liked him better, perhaps, if he had been a trifle worse. The pedagogic tone in which he had spoken to her cousin, and his use of the words 'my lad,' which, as she argued to herself (quite wrongly), he *must* know were very offensive to him, irritated her a little. She felt that William Henry had been schooled enough, and wanted encouragement.

'Did you get any inspiration from the turret of St. Mary Redcliffe?' she inquired.

'Well, yes,' he answered, blushing, and a blush very well became his handsome face; I did perpetrate——'

'Some mischief, I'll warrant,' exclaimed a harsh, disdainful voice. It was that of Mr. Samuel Erin, who had entered the room unobserved. 'And what was it you perpetrated, sir?'

William Henry looked abashed and annoyed. Margaret, though she stood in no little fear of her uncle, could

hardly restrain her indignation. Frank Dennis as usual interposed with the oil can.

'Your son has perhaps only written a poem, Mr. Erin, which in so young a man can hardly be considered a crime.'

'I don't know *that*, if the poem—as it probably was—was a bad one. If he has committed it'—here the old gentleman's face softened, as under the influence of the infrequent and home-made joke the grimmest face will do—'he has doubtless committed it to memory. Come, sir, let us have it.'

Now as, of all the pleasant moments which mitigate this painful life, there are none more charming than those passed in the recital of a poem of our own composition to (one pair of) loving ears, so there are none more embarrassing than those which are occupied in doing the same thing before an unsympathetic audience. Imagine poor Shelley condemned to recite his 'Skylark' or Keats his 'Nightingale' to a vestry meeting! That would indeed be bad enough; but if the bard himself is conscious that he has no skylark nor nightingale, but only a tomtit or yellowhammer, to let fly for their edification, how much more terrible must be his position! Poor William Henry was in even worse case, for one of his audience, as he well knew, was not only not *en rapport* with him, but antagonistic, a hostile critic. I once beheld a shivering schoolboy compelled to make an extempore ode to the moon to a circle of his fellow-students armed with towels knotted at the end, to flick him with if his muse should be considered unsatisfactory. Except that he was not in his night-shirt, as my young friend was, poor William Henry's position was almost as bad, and yet he dared not refuse to obey the paternal mandate.

'There are only a very few verses, sir,' he stammered.

'The fewer the better,' said Mr. Erin. He meant it for an encouragement, no doubt, a sort of 'so far the Court is with you,' but it had not an encouraging effect

upon his son. It seemed to him that he had just swallowed a pint of vinegar.

'Leave off those damnable faces and begin,' exclaimed Mr. Erin. It was only a quotation from his favourite bard, and not an inappropriate one, but it did not sound kind.

'It is brutal,' murmured Margaret under her breath, and at the same time she cast a glance of ineffable pity at the victim. It was like a ray of sunshine upon a chill day, at sight of which the bird bursts into song.

'The lines are on Chatterton,' he began by way of prelude:—

'Comfort and joys for ever fled,
He ne'er will warble more;
Ah me! the sweetest youth is dead
That e'er tuned reed before.
The hand of misery laid him low,
E'en hope forsook his brain;
Relentless man contemned his woe,
To him he sighed in vain.
Oppressed with want, in wild despair he cried,
"No more I'll live!" swallowed the draught, and died.'

Mr. Samuel Erin looked as if he had swallowed a draught; one of those recommended to persons suffering from the effects of poison.

'Shade of Shakespeare!' he cried, 'do you call that a poem?'

William Henry murmured something in mitigation about its being an acrostic. The old gentleman's sense of hearing was not acute, and led him to imagine he was being reproached for his surliness. He turned as red as a turkey-cock.

Margaret also flushed to her forehead; she too had misunderstood what her cousin had said, and the more easily because the words she thought he had used (a cross stick) were so appropriate. But how could he, *could* he, be so foolish as thus to give reins to his temper!

Lastly, Frank Dennis became a brilliant scarlet. He was half suffocated with suppressed laughter. Still, true *to his mission of* peacemaker, he contrived to splutter out

that when a poem was an acrostic, such perfection was not to be looked for as when the muse was unfettered.

'Oh, that's it, is it?' said Mr. Erin grimly. 'I've heard of young men wasting their time, and, what is worse, the time of their employers, in many ways; but that they should take to writing acrostics seems to me the *ne plus ultra* of human folly. Bah! give me a dish of tea.'

CHAPTER IV.

A REAL ENTHUSIAST.

I AM afraid it is rather taken for granted by parents in general, as regards any behaviour they may adopt towards their offspring, that religion is always upon their own side. And yet there is a very noteworthy text about 'provoking our children to wrath,' which it is a mistake to ignore. Wise and reverend signors may well have learnt by experience to take trifling annoyances with equanimity; but the *amour propre* of the young is a tender shoot, and very sensitive to rough handling.

The most sensitive plant of all is the lad with a turn for literature; and, as a rule, parents have the least patience with him. When the turn is not a mere taste, but a natural gift, this does not much matter; no true flame was ever put out by the breath of contempt; but when it halts midway the youth has a bad time of it. He shivers at every sneer, without the means of giving it the lie. 'Like a dart it strikes to his liver,' because his armour, unlike that of true genius, is not arrow-proof. He knows that he is not the fool that his folk take him for, but he has an uneasy consciousness that they are partly right; that his powers are not equal to his pretensions. This was the case with William Henry Erin.

He had a turn for literature, and, if an uncommon facility for writing indifferent verses is any proof of it,

even for poetry; and he found nobody to admit it, not even Margaret. 'It is very good, Willie, for a first attempt,' was the fatal eulogium she once passed upon the most cherished of his poetical productions; and his father, as we have seen, made no scruple of ridiculing his literary efforts. If the boy's predilection for such matters had interfered with his professional duties, it might have been excusable enough; but the conveyancers to whom William Henry was articled were quite satisfied with him. He was very careful and diligent, and though he had come to years of indiscretion, far from dissipated. If he loitered on his way to his employers' chambers in the New Inn, it was to turn over the leaves of some old poem on a book-stall, rather than to gaze on the young woman who might be behind it. Still, not being perfection, it was natural that he should feel resentment at his father's harshness, and at the slights to which his muse was exposed at his unsympathising hands. He had never had anyone to sympathise with his poetical aspirations except his friend Reginald Talbot, a fellow-clerk of his own age, who was also devoted to the Muses; and Talbot's praise had its drawbacks. First, he did not think it worth much; and secondly, it could not be obtained without reciprocity; and it went against William Henry's conscience to praise Talbot's poems.

'Well,' thought the young man, as he looked out of his attic window, which commanded a distant view of Stratford Church, 'there lies a man who was as little appreciated at my age as I am; and yet he made some noise in the world. He, too, some say, was a scrivener's clerk. He, too, was called Will—which is at least an interesting coincidence. He, too, fell in love at my age.' Here his reflections ended with a sigh, for the parallel extended no further. Shakespeare had not only wooed, but—with a little too much ease, indeed—had won; whereas Margaret Slade was far out of his reach. He had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Erin intended her to marry Dennis, and had brought him down with him to Stratford

'to throw the young people together,' as he would doubtless express it. Young people, indeed! why, Frank Dennis was old enough—well, scarcely, to be her father, unless he had been unusually precocious, but certainly to know better. 'Crabbed age'—the man was thirty if he was a day—'and youth cannot live together.' It was a most monstrous proposition! On the other hand, what could he, poor William Henry, do? If he could persuade Maggie to run away with him to-morrow, they must literally run, for he had hardly money enough, after that Bristol trip, to pay the first pike out of Stratford, and far less a post-chaise.

As he thought of his unacknowledged merits, and of the many obstacles to his union, he grew bitter against the whole scheme of creation. If poetic impulse could have projected him fifty years forward, he would doubtless have exclaimed, with the bard of Bon Gaultier,—

> Cussed be the clerk and the parson,
> Cussed be the whole concern!

but not having that vent for his feelings, he only loosened his neckcloth a bit and looked moody. Poor fellow! he had but two wishes in the world—to marry Margaret, and to get into print; and both these desires, just because he had no money, were denied him.

At that very time, Margaret at her window was thinking of him. She was not—she was certain she was not, the idea was quite ridioulous—in love with him; but, thanks to his father's conduct, she felt that pity for him which is akin to love. And he was certainly very handsome, and very fond of her. He had been foolish to come down to Stratford when it was clear her uncle didn't want him; but it was 'very nice of him,' too, and since he was there and upon his holiday—his one holiday in the year, poor fellow—it was cruel to snub him! Frank Dennis didn't snub him, that she would say for Frank: he was a kind, honest fellow, though rather old-fashioned, and just a trifle heavy in hand. She wished William Henry would talk

like him when addressing his father; though when addressing *her*, she confessed to herself that she preferred William Henry's way. It was really distressing to see her uncle and his son together; they mixed no better than oil and vinegar. She was well pleased to remember that Mr. Jervis, the Stratford poet, was coming that morning to breakfast with them, since his presence would prevent anything unseemly; moreover, he would probably take her uncle and Frank Dennis away with him to investigate antiquities, which would leave William Henry and herself to themselves.

John Jervis was but a carpenter in a small way of business, but he was much respected in the town, and had made himself a name beyond it, on account of the interest he took in all Shakespearean matters. The gentry in the neighbourhood spoke of him as 'a civil and inoffensive creature,' but he was 'corresponded with' by men of letters and learning in London. His position would have been better than it was had he not been so foolish as to publish a volume of poems—to be paid by subscription. This had subjected him to something much worse than criticism—to patronage. Every one who had advanced a few shillings for the appearance of that unfortunate volume became in a sense his master, and some of them exacted interest for their investment in advice, remonstrance, and dictation. It was a foolish thing of John Jervis to set up his trade—not carpentering, but the other—in Stratford-on-Avon. In Paisley there are, I have heard say, at this present moment fifty poets, all complaining that the world which will give them a monument after their death, in the meantime permits them to starve; but Paisley is a place which is scarcely poetic to begin with, whereas to be a local poet in Stratford was like setting up a shed for small coal in Newcastle. The good man had become quite aware of this by this time; he was very dissatisfied with his published productions (it is a common case; what we have in our desk seems as superior to what lies on our table as that which moves in

our brain is to what lies in our desk). He would have given as much to suppress his little volume as William Henry would have given to get *his* sown broadcast over an admiring land. And yet there was no question of comparison between them as respected merit. John Jervis was, within certain narrow limits, a true poet: what he saw he noted, what he noted he felt; so far he followed his great master. He even emitted a modest light of his own, which was not reflected: he was not a star, but he was a glow-worm. Most of us are but worms without the glow.

Every one who came to Stratford at that time for Shakespeare's sake—and no one came for any other reason—was recommended to apply to John Jervis for information. On receiving any summons of this nature he put aside his carpenter's tools, took off his apron, and donned his Sabbath garb. A carpenter in his Sunday clothes in these days is a sad sight; he represents one branch of his business only, that of the undertaker: but in the times of which we write it was not so. Wigs were not yet gone out of fashion in Warwickshire, but John Jervis could not afford what was called the 'Citizen's Sunday Buckle' or 'Bob Major,' because it had three tiers of curls. He had too much good taste to use the 'Minor Bob' or Hair Cap, short in the neck to show the stock buckle, and stroked away from the face so as to seem (like Tristram Shandy) as though the wearer had been skating against the wind. He wore his own grey hair and a modest grey suit, in which, however, none but a flippant young fellow like Master William Henry Erin could have likened him to a master baker. His face was homely but pleasant, and had a certain dignity; his manner retiring but not reticent. It was his business to answer questions, but he did not volunteer information. He had, indeed, a secret contempt for the majority of his clients; they had more appetite for the Shakespearean husks, the few dry details that could be picked up concerning their Idol, than for the corn—what manner of man he had been in spirit, or

how the scenery about his home had affected his writings. Jervis found Mr. Erin to be no better than his other visitors: hungry for facts, greedy for particulars, and combative. He talked of the Confession of Faith found in the roof of the house in Henley Street, and rubbed his hands, notwithstanding that his enemy had since retracted his belief in it, over Malone's credulity.

'"An unworthy member of the Holy Catholic religion," indeed! It is monstrous, incredible.'

'That phrase had reference to the father, however,' observed Jervis.

'True, but that was the art of the forger, himself of the old faith, no doubt. He wished to make our Shakespeare a born Papist. Now, that he was a good Protestant is indubitable. "I'd beat him like a dog," says Sir Andrew. "What! for being a Puritan?" returns Sir Toby. What irony! You are of my opinion, I hope, Mr. Jervis?'

'I have scarcely formed an opinion upon the matter,' was the modest reply. 'Shakespeare was Catholic in one sense; but I agree with you that he was not one to be much comforted by the "holy sacrifice of the mass," as the so-called Confession put it.'

'I should think not, indeed. He was not partial to priests. "When thou liest *howling*,"' quoted Mr. Erin triumphantly.

'Still, being a stage-player, I doubt if he was partial to the Puritans. No; such things moved him neither way; religious controversies he looked upon as on other quarrels, as "valour misbegot." If he could not see into the future, he saw five hundred years ahead of his contemporaries, who were burning Francis Kett for heresy at Norwich.'

Mr. Erin was not certain whether Kett was a Protestant or a Catholic (on which depended his view of the circumstance), so he only shook his head.

'You mean, Mr. Jervis,' said Margaret timidly, 'that in Shakespeare's eyes there were no heretics?'

The man in grey looked at his gentle inquirer and

bowed his head assentingly. 'None, as I think, young lady, save those who disbelieved in good.'

'That is not established,' said Mr. Erin argumentatively.

'I am afraid your uncle thinks *me* a heretic,' said Mr. Jervis smiling. Then, perceiving that Margaret looked interested, he told her of the marvellous boy—name unknown, but whose fame still survived—who had been Shakespeare's contemporary at Stratford. How, so the legend ran, he had been thought his equal in genius, and his future greatness been prophesied with the same confidence, but who had died in youth, a mute, inglorious Shakespeare.

'I often picture to myself,' said the old man dreamily, 'the friendship of those two boys.'

'Do you think they went out poaching together?' inquired William Henry demurely. He was not without humour, and was also perhaps a little jealous of the attention Margaret paid their visitor.

'Poaching!' exclaimed Mr. Erin angrily, 'how gross and contemptible are your ideas, sir!'

'Still,' interposed Dennis, his sense of justice aiding his wish to stand between Mr. Erin's wrath and its object—Margaret's cousin—'Shakespeare did transgress in that way. It is not likely that he strained at a hare if he swallowed a deer.'

'No doubt he poached,' admitted Jervis gravely. 'He was very human, and did all things that became a boy. But I was thinking rather of the companionship of the two boys than their pursuits. Their talk was not of hares nor of rabbits. How one would like to know their boyish confidences! what were their ambitions, their aspirations, their views of life; which one was about to leave, and in which the other was to fill so large a space in the thoughts of man—for ever. It was in this little town they lived and talked together; learnt their lessons from one book perhaps, in yonder school, each without a thought of the other's immortality, albeit of such different kinds.'

The solemnity of the speaker's manner, and the genuineness of feeling which his tone displayed, had no little effect upon his audience, but on each in a different way. Margaret's mind was stirred to its depths by this simple dream-picture, and seeing her so the two young men felt a touch of sympathy with it.

'Is there any sure foundation to go upon as to this playmate of Shakespeare's?' inquired Mr. Erin, note-book in hand—'any record, any document?'

The visitor shook his head. 'Nothing, but wherever, in the country round, Shakespeare's youth is alluded to, this story of his friend is told. It is a local legend, that is all; but it seems to me to have life in it. The world outside knows nothing of it. It interests itself in Shakespeare only, and but little in his belongings; but with us, breathing the air he breathed, walking on the same ground he trod, things are different; we still fancy him amongst us, and not alone. There is Hamnet, too; we still speak of Hamnet.'

It was fortunate for William Henry that he repressed the observation that rose to his lips. He was about to say, 'You don't mean Hamlet, do you?'

The same idea I am afraid occurred to Mr. Dennis, but for even a briefer space; he felt that there must be some mistake somewhere; but also that he himself might be making it.

'Buried here, August the 11th, 1596,' observed Mr. Erin, as though he was reading from the register itself.

'Just so,' continued Jervis, 'only a little over two hundred years ago. He was eleven years old, too young to understand the greatness of him who begat him, yet old enough to have an inkling of it. Once a year or so, as it is believed, his father came home to Stratford fresh from the companionship of the great London wits and poets—Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Camden, and Selden. What meetings must those have been with his only son; the boy who he fondly hoped, but hoped in vain, would *inherit the proceeds* of his fame! I wonder how his

mother used to speak of her husband to her children? Did she excuse to them his long absence, his dwelling afar off, or did she inveigh against it? Did she recognise the splendour of his genius, or did she only love him? Or did she not love him?'

'Let us hope she was not unworthy of him,' said Mr. Erin, his enthusiasm, stirred by the other's eloquence, rising on a stronger wing than usual.

'As a wife she was sorely tried,' murmured Mr. Jervis. 'I love to think of her less than of Hamnet, so lowly born in one sense, and in the other of such illustrious parentage. The news of his father's growing fame must have reached the boy, and the contrast could not fail to have struck him. Then to have seen that father bending over his little bed, to have kissed that noble face, and felt himself in his embrace; to have known that he was the child whom Shakespeare's soul loved best in all the world, what a sensation, what an experience!'

'Some mementoes of the immortal bard are, I hope, still to be purchased?' observed Mr. Erin curtly. He had engaged Mr. Jervis's services for practical purposes, and began to resent this waste of time—which was money—upon sentimental hypothesis. Shakespeare's wife was a topic one could sympathise with; there was documentary evidence in existence concerning her, but over little Hamnet's grave there was not even a tombstone.

'Mementoes? Yes, there is mulberry-wood enough to last some time,' said Mr. Jervis slily; 'you shall have your pick of them.'

'But no MSS.?'

'Not that I know of. There has been a report, however, of late, that Mr. Williams, of Clopton House, has found some that were removed from New Place at the time of the fire.'

'Great heavens!' exclaimed Mr. Erin, with much excitement, 'what, from New Place, Shakespeare's own home? Let us go at once; all other things can wait.—William Henry, come along with us, and bring your little

book.—You can stay here with Maggie, Dennis, till I come back.'

If he could have dispensed with the presence of John Jervis himself, he would have been glad to do so; for what is true of a feast is also true of treasure-trove, 'the fewer (the finders) the better the fare.'

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD SETTLE.

WILLIAM HENRY, far from sharing his father's enthusiasm at any time, was on this occasion less than ever inclined to applaud it. If Clopton House should be found full of Shakespearean MSS., it would not afford him half the pleasure he would have derived from a *tête-à-tête* with his cousin Margaret; a treat which, it seemed, was to be thrown away upon Frank Dennis. Why didn't Mr. Erin select *him* to take notes for him from the musty documents? A question the folly of which only a high state of irritation could excuse. He knew perfectly well that his own dexterity and promptness in copying had caused himself to be chosen for the undesirable task, and that knowledge irritated him the more. It was only when he could be of some material use to him, as in the present instance, that his father took the least account of him. If he could bring himself to steal one of those precious documents, was his bitter reflection, and secrete it as some wretched slave secretes a diamond in the mines of Golconda, then, perhaps, and then only, he might be permitted to marry Margaret. For a bit of parchment with Shakespeare's name upon it, most certainly for a whole play in his handwriting, Mr. Samuel Erin, it was probable, would have bartered fifty nieces, and thrown his own soul into the bargain. Our young friend, however, was quite aware of what a poet of a later date would have told

him, that 'an angry fancy' is a poor ware to go to market with; so, with as good a grace as he could, he put on his hat and accompanied Mr. Erin and his cicerone to Clopton House, which was but a few yards down the street.

It was a good-sized mansion of great antiquity, but had fallen into disrepair and even decay. Its present tenant, Mr. Williams, was a farmer in apparently far from prosperous circumstances. Half of the many chambers were in total darkness, the windows having been bricked up to save the window tax, and the handsome old-world furniture was everywhere becoming a prey to the moth and the worm. As a matter of fact, however, these were not evidences of poverty. Mr. Williams had enough and to spare of worldly goods, only of some of them he did not think so much as other people of more cultivated taste would have done. A Warwickshire farmer of to-day would have considered many things as valuable in Clopton House which their unappreciative proprietor had relegated to the cock-loft. It was to that apartment, indeed, that Mr. Erin was led as soon as the nature of his inquiries—which he had stated generally, and to avoid suspicion of his actual object, to be concerning antiquities—was understood. The room was filled with mouldering household goods of remote antiquity, chiefly of the time of Henry VII., in whose reign the proprietor of the house, Sir Hugh Clopton, had been Lord Mayor of London. Among other things, for example, there was an emblazoned representation on vellum of Elizabeth, Henry's wife, as she lay in state in the chapel of the Tower, where she died in childbirth.

'You may have that if you like,' said Mr. Williams to his visitor carelessly. He was a fat, coarse man, but very good-natured. 'For, being on vellum, it is no use to light the fire with.'

'You don't mean to say you light your fire with anything I see here?' gasped Mr. Erin.

'Well, no, there's nothing much left of that sort of

rubbish; we made a clean sweep of it all about a fortnight since.'

'There were no old MSS., I hope?'

'MSS.! Heaps on 'em. They came from New Place at the time of the fire, you see, though Heaven knows why anyone should have thought them worth saving. They were all piled in that little room yonder, and as I wanted a place for some young partridges as I am bringing up, I burnt the whole lot of 'em.'

'You looked at them first, of course, to make sure that there was nothing of consequence?'

'Well, of course I did. I hope Dick Williams ain't such a fool as to burn law documents. No, they were mostly poetry and that kind of stuff.'

'But did you make certain about the handwriting? Else, my good sir, it might have been that of Shakespeare himself.'

'Shakespeare! Well, what of him? Why, there was bundles and bundles with his name wrote upon them. It was in this very fireplace I made a regular bonfire of them.'

There was a solitary chair in the little chamber, set apart for the partridges, into which Mr. Samuel Erin dropped, as though he had been a partridge himself, shot by a sportsman.

'You — made — a — bonfire — of — Shakespeare's — poems!' he said, ejaculating the words very slowly and dejectedly, like minute guns. 'May Heaven have mercy upon your miserable soul!'

'I *say*,' cried Mr. Williams, turning very red, 'what the deuce do you mean by talking to me as if I was left for execution? What have I done? I've robbed nobody.'

'You have robbed everybody — the whole world!' exclaimed Mr. Erin excitedly. 'In burning those papers you burnt the most precious things on earth. A bonfire, you call it! Nero, who fiddled while Rome was burning, was guiltless compared to you. You are a disgrace to

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humanity. Shakespeare had you in his eye, sir, when he spoke of "a marble-hearted fiend."'

Mr. Samuel Erin had his favourite bard by heart, and was consequently in no want of 'base comparisons,' but he stopped a moment for want of breath. Annoyance and indignation had had the same effect upon Mr. Williams. He had never been 'bully-ragged' in his own house for 'nothing'—except by his wife—before. Purple and speechless, he regarded his antagonist with protruding eyes, a human Etna on the verge of eruption.

Mr. John Jervis knew his man. Up to this point he had taken no part in the controversy; but he now seized Mr. Erin by the arm, and led him rapidly downstairs. Their last few steps were accomplished with dangerous velocity, for a flying body struck both of them violently on the back. This was William Henry, who, unable to escape the wild rush of the bull, had described a parabola in the air.

'If there's law in England, you shall smart for this,' roared the infuriated animal over the banisters.

'Perhaps I ought to have told you that Mr. Williams was of a hasty disposition,' observed Mr. Jervis apologetically, when they found themselves in the street.

'Hasty!' exclaimed Mr. Erin, whose mind was much too occupied with sacrilege to concern himself with assault; 'a more thoughtless and precipitate idiot never breathed. The idea of his having burnt those precious papers! I suppose, after what has happened, it would be useless to inquire just now whether any scrap of them has escaped the flames; otherwise my son can go back——'

'I am sure that wouldn't do,' interposed Mr. Jervis confidently.

William Henry breathed a sigh of relief. The impressions of Stratford-on-Avon seemed to him indelible; they had left on him such 'local colouring' as time itself, he felt, could hardly remove. Fortunately for his *amour propre*, not a word was said by his father of their reception at *Clopton House*. His whole mind was monopolised

by the literary disappointment. The inconvenience that had happened to his son did not weigh with him a feather.

The whole party now proceeded to Mr. Jervis's establishment, where the remains of the famous mulberry tree were kept in stock. Mr. Erin was haunted by the notion that some Shakespearean fanatic might step in and buy the whole of it before he could secure some mementoes, whereas the birthplace in Henley Street could 'wait;' an idea at which, for the life of him, the proprietor of the sacred timber could not restrain a dry smile. It was the general opinion that enough tobacco stoppers, busts, and wafer seals had already been sold to account for a whole grove of mulberry trees. Mr. Erin was very energetic with his new acquaintance on the road, about precautions against fire (insurance against it was out of the question, of course), but when he had possessed himself of what he wanted, and the matter was again referred to as they came away, it was noticeable that he had not another word to say upon the side of prudence.

'He declaimed against Mr. Williams' rashness,' whispered William Henry to Margaret; 'but my belief is that he would now set fire to that timber yard without a scruple in order to render his purchases unique.'

Maggie held up her finger reprovingly, but her laughing eyes belied the gesture.

Both these young people, indeed, had far too keen a sense of fun to be enthusiasts.

To Mr. Hart, the butcher (who at that time occupied the house in Henley Street), as an indirect descendant of the immortal bard, through his sister, Mr. Erin paid a deference that was almost servile. He examined his lineaments, in the hopes of detecting a likeness to the Chandos portrait, with a particularity that much abashed the object of his scrutiny, and even tried to get him to accompany him to the church, that he might compare his features with those of the bust of the bard in the chancel.

But it was in the presence of the bust itself that Mr. Erin exhibited himself in the most characteristic fashion

Standing on what was to him more hallowed ground than any blessed by priests, and within a few feet of the ashes of his idol, he was nevertheless unable to restrain his indignation against the commentator Malone, through whose influence the coloured bust had recently been painted white. Instead of bursting into Shakespearean quotation, as it was his wont to do on much less provocation, he repeated with malicious gusto the epigram to which the act of vandalism in question had given birth:—

> Stranger, to whom this monument is shown,
> Invoke the poet's curses on Malone,
> Whose meddling zeal his barbarous taste displays,
> And daubed his tombs'o ie as he marred his plays.

His rage, indeed, so rose a the spectacle, that for the present he protested that he found himself unable to pursue his investigations within the sacred edifice, and proposed that the party should start forthwith to visit Anne Hathaway's cottage at Shottery.

There was at present no more need for Mr. Jervis's services, so that gentleman was left behind. Mr. Erin and Frank Dennis led the way by the footpath across the fields that had been pointed out to them, and William Henry and Margaret followed. It was a lovely afternoon; the trees and grass, upon which a slight shower had recently fallen, emitted a fragrance inexpressibly fresh. All was quiet save for the song of the birds, which were giving thanks for the sunshine.

'How different this is from Norfolk Street!' murmured Margaret.

'It is the same to me,' answered her companion in a low tone, 'because all that makes life dear to me is where you are. When you are not there, Margaret, I have no home.'

'You should not talk of your home in that way,' returned she reprovingly.

'Yet you know it is the truth, Margaret; that there is no happiness for me under Mr. Erin's roof, and that my very presence there is unwelcome to him.'

'I wish you would not call your father Mr. Erin,' she exclaimed reproachfully.

'Did you not know, then, that he was not my father?'

'What?' In her extreme surprise she spoke in so loud a key that it attracted the attention of the pair before them. Mr. Erin looked back with a smile. 'Shakespeare must have taken this walk a thousand times, Maggie,' he observed.

She nodded and made some suitable reply, but for the moment she was thinking of things nearer home. She now remembered that she had heard something to the disadvantage of Mr. Erin's deceased wife, one of those unpleasant remarks concerning some one connected with her which a modest girl hears by accident, and endeavours to forget. Until Mr. Erin had become a widower Margaret had never been permitted by her motl er to visit Norfolk Street. Mrs. Erin had been a widow—a Mrs. Irwyn—but she had not become Mr. Erin's wife at first, because her husband had been alive. It was probable, then, that what William Henry had said was true; he was Mrs. Erin's son, but not Mr. Erin's, though he passed as such. This was doubtless the reason why her uncle and he were on such distant terms with one another, and why he never called him father. On the other hand, it was no reason why her uncle should be so harsh with the young man, and treat him with such scant consideration. Some women would have despised the lad for the misfortune of his birth, but Margaret was incapable of an injustice; her knowledge of his unhappy position served to draw him closer to her than before.

By the blush that, in spite of her efforts to repress it, spread over her face, William Henry understood that she gave credit to his statement, and by the tones of her voice he felt that it had done him no injury in her eyes. It was a matter, however, which, though necessary to be made plain, could not be discussed.

'What your uncle says is very true, Maggie,' he *quietly remarked.* 'This must have been Shakespeare's

favourite walk, for love never goes by the high road when it can take the footpath. The smell of that bean-field, the odour of the hay of that very meadow, may have come to his nostrils as it comes to ours. His heart as he drew nigh to yonder village must have beat as mine beats, because he knew his love was near him.'

'There is the cottage,' cried Mr. Erin excitedly, pointing in front of him, and addressing his niece. 'Is it not picturesque, with its old timbers and its mossy roof?'

'It will make an excellent illustration for your book,' observed Frank Dennis the practical.

'It has been illustrated already pretty often,' returned the other drily, 'or we should not recognise it so easily.'

'Let us hope it's the right one,' muttered William Henry, 'for it will be poor I who will have to suffer for it if it is not.'

Fortunately, however, there was no mistake. They stepped across the little brook, and stood in the garden with its well and its old-world flowers. Before them was the orchard 'for whispering lovers made,' and on the right the low vine-clad cottage with the settle, or courting-seat, at its door.

Here Shakespeare came to win and woo his wife; whatever doubt may be thrown on his connection with any other dwelling, that much is certain. On the threshold of the cottage Mr. Erin took off his hat, not from courtesy, for he was not overburdened with politeness, but from the same reverence with which he doffed it at the church. He entered without noticing whether he was followed by the others or not. A descendant of Anne Hathaway's, though not of her name, received him; fit priest for such a shrine. That he had not read a line of Shakespeare in no way detracted from his sacred character. Frank Mennis, himself not a little moved, went in likewise. As Dargaret was following him, William Henry gently laid his hand upon her wrist and led her to the settle, which was very ancient and worm-eaten.

'Sit here a moment, Maggie; this is the very seat, as

Mr. Jervis tells me, on which Shakespeare sat with her who became his wife. Here, on some summer afternoon like this, perhaps, he told her of his love.'

Margaret trembled, but sat down.

'It is amazing to think of it,' she said; 'he must have looked on those same trees, and on this very well.'

'But he did not look at *them*, Maggie,' said the young man tenderly, 'he looked at the face beside him, as I am looking now, and I will wager that it was not so fair a face.'

'What nonsense you talk, Willie! Why do you not give yourself up as your—as Mr. Erin does—to the associations of the place? They are so interesting.'

'It's just what I am doing, dear Maggie. It was here they interchanged their vows; a different pair, indeed, though not altogether so superior, since to my mind you excel Anne Hathaway as much as I fall short of her marvellous bridegroom. That I am no Shakespeare is very true; yet it seems to me, Maggie, that when I say, "I love you," even he could have said nothing more true and deep. I love you, I love you, I love you—do you hear me?' continued the young man passionately.

'You frighten me, Willie,' answered Maggie in trembling tones. 'And then it is so foolish, since you know that even if I said—what you would have me say—it could be of no use.'

'But you think it, you *think* it? That is all I ask,' urged the other earnestly. 'If matters were not as they are; if I got Mr. Erin's consent; if I had sufficient means to offer you a home—not indeed worthy of you, for then it must needs be a palace—but comfort, competence, you would not say "Nay"? Dearest Maggie, my own dear darling Maggie, give me hope. "The miserable," as Shakespeare tells us, "have no other medicine:" and I am very, very miserable; give me hope, the light of hope.'

'It would be a will-of-the-wisp, Willie.'

'*No matter;* I would bless it if it led me to my grave.

If I had it, I could work, I could win fortune, even fame perhaps. You doubt it? Try me, try me!' he continued vehemently, 'and if after some time, a little, little time, no harvest comes of it, and my brain proves barren, why, then I will confess myself a dreamer: only in the meantime be mine in spirit; do not promise yourself to another; let us say a year; well, then, six months; you can surely wait six months for me, Maggie?'

'It would be six months of delusion, Willie.'

'Let it be so; a fool's paradise, but still for me a paradise. I have not had so many happy hours that fate should grudge me these. I know I am asking a strange thing; still I am not like those selfish lovers who, being in the same pitiful case with me as to means, exact, like dogs in the manger, vows of eternal fidelity from those whom they will, in all probability, be never in a position to wed. I ask you not for your heart, Maggie, but for the loan of it; for six months' grace, probation. If I fail to show myself worthy of you—if I fail to make a name—or rather to show the promise of making it within that time, then I return the loan. I do not say, as was doubtless said by him who sat here before me, "Be my wife!" I only say, "For six months to come, betroth yourself to no other man." Come, Maggie, Frank Dennis is not so very pressing.'

It was a dangerous card to play, this mention of his rival's name, but it won the game. Dennis was as true as steel, but through a modest mistrust of his own merits—a thing that did not trouble William Henry—he was a backward lover. He had had opportunities of declaring himself which he had neglected, thinking of himself too lowlily, or that the time was not yet ripe; or preferring the hope that lies in doubt, to the despair that is begotten of denial; and this, I think, had a little piqued the girl. She liked him well enough, well enough even to marry him; but she liked William Henry better, and other things being equal, would have preferred him for a husband. They were not equal, but it was possible—just

possible, for the moment she had caught from her reputed cousin some of that confidence he felt in his own powers—that they might be made so. At all events, six months was not a space to 'delve the parallels in beauty's brow;' and then it was so hard to deny him.

'You shall have your chance, Willie,' she murmured, 'though, as I have warned you, it is a very poor one.'

He drew her nearer to him, despite some pretence of resistance, and would have touched her cheek with his lips, when the cottage door was suddenly thrown open behind them, and Mr. Erin appeared with an old chair in his hands, which he brandished like a quarter-staff above his head. He looked so flushed and excited that William Henry thought his audacious proposal had been overheard, and that he was about to be separated from his Margaret for ever by a violent death.

'It is mine! it is mine!' cried the antiquary triumphantly. 'I have bought Anne Hathaway's chair.'

CHAPTER VI.

AN AUDACIOUS CRITICISM.

In the case of crime, every person who is concerned in its detection looks very properly to motive: the law, indeed, in its award of punishment, disregards it, but then, as a famous authority (and himself in authority), namely, Mr. Bumble, observes, 'the law is a hass.' Where mankind falls into error is in looking for motive in all cases, whether criminal or otherwise. A very large number of persons are actuated by causes for which motive is far too serious a term. They are often moved by sudden impulse, nay, even by whim or caprice, to take very important steps. When interrogated, after the mischief has been done, as to why they did this or that, they reply, '*I don't know,*' and are discredited. Yet, as a matter of fact, the

motive was so slight, or rather so momentary (for it was probably strong enough while it lasted), that they have really forgotten all about it.

William Henry Erin, of whose character the world subsequently took a very different and erroneous view, was essentially a man of impulse. He had attributes, it is true, of another and even of an antagonistic kind. He was very punctual and diligent in his habits, he was neat and exact in his professional work; though a poet, his views of life, or at all events of his own position in it, were practical enough, yet he was impatient, passionate, and impulsive. His proposition to Margaret Slade had been made with such stress and energy that it was no wonder (albeit she knew his character better than most people) that she thought it founded upon some scheme for the future already formed in his own mind. Of its genuineness there could be no shadow of doubt, but she also took it for granted that he had some ground for expectation, which, at all events to his own mind, seemed solid, that within the space of time he had mentioned, something would occur to place him in a better social position. Her impression, or rather her apprehension (for she did not much believe in his literary talents—a circumstance, by-the-by, which showed that she was by no means over head and ears in love with him), was that he trusted to the publication of his poems to place him on the road to prosperity; his use of the words 'fame and fortune' certainly seemed to point to that direction, and what other road was there open to him?

Whereas, as a matter of fact, there was not even that poor halfpennyworth of substratum for his hopes. Circumstances—the finding himself alone with her he loved on Shakespeare's courting-seat—had, of course, been the immediate cause of his amazing appeal, but they were also the chief cause. The knowledge that Frank Dennis was of the party and could gain her ear at any moment, with the certainty of Mr. Erin's advocacy to back him, had, moreover, made the young man madly jealous. To

secure his beloved Margaret, even for a little while, from so dreaded a rival, was something gained; and then there was the chapter of accidents. We know not what a day may bring forth, how much less what may happen within six months! William Henry was but a boy, yet how many a grown man trusts to such contingencies! In the city, 'twenty-four hours to turn about in' is often considered time enough for a total change of fortune. It might be added that, unless Margaret should turn traitress and reveal his secret (which was impossible), he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by his delay; but, to do the young man justice, that idea had not entered into his mind. Passion with the bit between her teeth had run away with him.

As to precocity, it must be remembered that he lived in reckless days, when men did not wait as they do now till they were five-and-forty years of age to marry; by that time, with enterprise and luck, many a gentleman was in the enjoyment of his third, or even his fourth honeymoon.

Still, William Henry was not unconscious that he had taken an audacious step, and felt a genuine sense of relief on finding that Mr. Samuel Erin had provided himself in that armchair with a relic and not a weapon.

This invaluable acquisition—which, when it was brought to London, was placed on a little elevation made on purpose for it in his study, with a brass plate at its foot (after the manner of chairs in our Madame Tussaud's) with the words 'Anne Hathaway's Chair' upon it—had the effect of putting its possessor into good humour for the remainder of his stay at Stratford, a circumstance which had the happiest results for those about him. William Henry, for his part, was in the seventh heaven. It is not only our virtues which have the power of bestowing happiness upon us—at all events, for a season. Shakespeare himself makes a striking observation on that matter in one of his sonnets; having spoken plainly enough of certain errors, gallantries of which he has

repented, he adds, with an altogether unexpected frankness,—

> But, by all above,
> These blenches gave my heart another youth.

He does not put his tongue in his cheek at morality, far from it; but he rolls the sweet morsel, the remembrance of forbidden pleasure, under his tongue. It is one of the mistakes that our divines fall into to deny to our little peccadilloes any pleasure at all, whereas the fact is that the blossom of them is often very fair and fragrant, though the fruit is full of ashes, and, like the goodly apple, rotten at the core.

And thus it was with William Henry, who, without, indeed, having committed any great enormity, had certainly not been justified in obtaining the loan of his cousin's love; the consciousness of his temporary possession of it made a very happy man of him for a season. He made no ungenerous use of his advantage, he did not take an ell because he had gained an inch; but he hugged himself in that new-found sense of security as one basks in the summer sunshine. Those days at Stratford were the happiest days of his life. Considering the means by which they were obtained, one can hardly apply to them the usual phrase 'a foretaste of heaven;' but they were happy days snatched from a life which was fated to hold few such. It was, perhaps, out of gratitude to him whose memory had helped him to this happiness, that the young man really began to take an interest in Shakespearean matters; and this again reacted to his advantage, since it gratified Mr. Erin, whose good-will, difficult to gain by other means, was approached by that channel with extraordinary facility.

In association with Mr. Jervis the young man ransacked the little town for mementoes of its patron saint, and was fortunate enough to discover a few, which, though of doubtful authenticity, were very welcome to the enthusiastic collector. If they were not the rose, i.e. actual

relics, they were near the rose, as proximity is counted in such cases. No doubt it is the same with more sacred relics—in a deficiency of toe-nails of any particular saint it must be something, though not of course so rapturous, to secure a toe-nail of some saint in the next century. As regards Shakespeare, it is certainly one of the marvels in connection with that marvellous man that not a scrap of the handwriting, save his autograph, of one who wrote so much ever turns up to reward the pains of the searcher; nay, there is only one letter extant, even of those that were written to him—a commonplace request for a loan from the man who afterwards became his son-in-law; under which circumstances, when one comes to think about it, there may be some excuse for the language used by Mr. Samuel Erin to that reckless incendiary, Mr. Williams, of Clopton House.

If to be indifferent, as William Henry had been suspected of being, to the charms of Shakespeare was a crime in Mr. Erin's eyes, it may be easily imagined how he resented the least imputation of any portion of his idol having been composed of clay. There were circumstances connected with his union with Anne Hathaway, and also with that little adventure of his with Justice Shallow's deer, which were dangerous to allude to in Mr. Erin's presence; and if the moral qualities of his hero (albeit, we may have gathered, Mr. Erin was himself, though Protestant, by no means Puritan) could not in safety be called in question, any suggestion of weakness in him as a writer was still more unendurable. Nevertheless, even prudent Frank Dennis contrived to put his foot in it in this very matter, and thereby narrowly escaped falling out of Mr. Erin's good graces for the term of his natural life. It was during an expedition to Charlecote; the little party, having left their vehicle at the gate, were walking through the park, Mr. Erin wrapped in contemplation—endeavouring perhaps to identify the very oak (in 'As You Like It') where the poor sequestered stag had 'come to languish'—while the young people a few

paces behind were indulging in a little quiet banter upon the forbidden subject of deer-stealing.

'I suppose that he did steal that deer?' observed Margaret slily in a hushed whisper.

'There is no doubt of it,' answered Frank; 'he had to fly from Stratford to London for that very reason, to get out of Sir Thomas's way.'

'Nay, nay,' put in William Henry, I am afraid with some slight imitation of his father's solemn manner when dealing with the sacred topic; 'let us not say steal, it was what "the wise do call convey." We do a good deal of it in New Inn ourselves.'

'Yonder are our "velvet friends,"' said Mr. Erin, pointing to a herd of deer in the distance.

The allusion caused some trepidation in his companions, as chiming in only too opportunely with their late disloyal remarks; and it was much to their relief that Mr. Erin proceeded, as was his wont, to indulge himself in quotation.

> 'And indeed, my lord,
> The wretched animal heaved forth such groans
> That their discharge did stretch his leather coat
> Almost to bursting; and the big round tears
> Coursed one another down his innocent nose
> In piteous chase.'

'What a graphic picture! "His innocent nose." Who but Shakespeare would have dared to write "his innocent nose"?'

'Very true, sir,' said William Henry gravely. '"His innocent nose."'

Not a muscle of his face betrayed the drollery within him. He certainly possessed some tricks of the actor's trade. Margaret stooped to pluck a daisy, an action which sufficed to account for the colour rushing to her cheeks. Frank Dennis, whose wits were not of the nimble sort fitted for such sudden emergency, felt he was about to suffocate. It seemed to him he had no alternative between speech—the act of saying something, no matter what—and an explosion.

'With regard to deer shedding tears,' he observed, 'I have a friend who is a great naturalist, who tells me, as a matter of fact, that they can't do it.'

'Can't do what?' inquired Mr. Erin curtly.

'He says that from the peculiar formation of the ducts of the deer, or perhaps from the absence of them——I know nothing about the matter myself, sir,' put in the unhappy Frank precipitately, for the antiquary was looking daggers at him.

'You know quite as much about it as your friend then,' thundered Mr. Erin. 'Great heavens! that a man like him, or you, or anybody, should venture to pick a hole in one of the noblest descriptions of the language: to find faults in Shakespeare himself! You remind me, sir, of the sacrilegious fellow in France, the other day, who gave it as his opinion that if he had been present at the Creation, he could have suggested improvements.'

'But indeed, sir, it was not my opinion.'

'It is quite as bad to quote those of infamous persons as to originate them yourself.'

Mr. Frank Dennis had very little of the serpent in him, not even its prudence; his sense of justice was shocked by this outrageous speech.

'But it is a mere question of fact and science——'

'Science,' interrupted the other vehemently, 'that is the argument of the Atheist against the Scriptures. Science, indeed! what is science when compared with the genius of Shakespeare? He told you, sir, that deer shed tears, and if they don't, why—damn their eyes—they ought to!'

The argument was, at least, conclusive; nothing more remained to be said, or was said. Mr. Erin stalked on like a turkey-cock ruffled; his idol had been insulted, and he felt that he had done well to be angry. Every deer he saw stimulated his wrath. 'Confound the fellow!' he murmured as he passed the antlered herd, 'it would serve him right if they tossed him.' It even crossed his mind *perhaps that* Margaret was right after all in receiving

Dennis's attentions so coldly; that he was certainly a very pig-headed young man.

Frank Dennis, too, good-natured as he was, was not a little put out. For the moment he felt almost as disrespectful towards Shakespeare as Sydney Smith's friend was to the Equator; but his eye fell on Margaret, and he put a bridle on his tongue.

His sense of annoyance soon faded away, but with the antiquary it was not so easily effaced. This incident was of considerable advantage to William Henry and his little plan. In a company of three, when one of them has fallen out of our favour, one naturally rather 'cottons' to the other, if it is only to show the offender what he has forfeited by his misconduct; and from thenceforward Mr. Erin showed himself at least less severe towards the young man who bore his name. Nay, what was of more consequence, the symptoms he had exhibited of favouring Frank Dennis's pretensions to his niece's hand manifestly slackened; he no longer troubled himself to throw the young people together. On the other hand, though of course with no idea that there was risk in it (for he both despised him and 'despised his youth'), he suffered William Henry and Margaret to 'foregather' as much as they pleased. He still felt so resentful to Frank's sacrilegious ideas as respected the customs of deer when under emotion, that it was distasteful to him to be shut up with him as a companion; and in order to mitigate his society he took an inside place for William Henry (notwithstanding that, except in the matter of MSS. and first editions, he had a frugal mind) in the coach to town.

CHAPTER VII.

A COLLECTOR'S GRATITUDE.

THE effects of a prolonged holiday upon the human mind are various. Like other things much 'recommended by the faculty,' it does not suit every one. It is the opinion of an eminent physician of my acquaintance that little comes of it in the way of wholesomeness except sunburn; and that when that wears off, the supposed convalescent looks as he feels—satiated and jaded. To William Henry, the conveyancer's clerk, that week or two at Stratford-on-Avon was what the long vacation is to many lawyers. He found a great difficulty in setting to work again at his ordinary duties. His fellow-clerk had left his employer's service, so that he had his room to himself—a circumstance that became of much more importance than he had at that time any idea of—but business was slack at Mr. Bingley's office. The young fellow had plenty of leisure, though among old mortgage deeds and titles to estates, it might be thought he had small opportunities of spending it pleasantly. Under ordinary circumstances this would not, however, have been the case with him. He had been brought up in an atmosphere of antiquity: the satisfaction expressed by his father at the acquisition of any ancient rarity had naturally impressed itself upon his mind; the only occasions on which he had won his praise had been on his bringing home for his acceptance some old tract or pamphlet from a bookstall; and in time he had learnt to have some appreciation of such things for their own sake, albeit, like some dealer in old china, without much reverence. His turn for poetry, such as it was, was due, perhaps, to the many old romances and poems in Mr. Erin's library rather than to any natural bent in that direction; a circumstance, indeed, which was pretty evident from the young poet's style; for style is easy enough to

catch, whereas ideas must come of themselves. His holiday had grievously unsettled him. He had brought back his dream with him, but, once more face to face with the facts of life, he perceived the many obstacles to its realisation. The only legitimate road to success—that of daily duty—would never lead thither; but there might be a short cut to it through his father's favour. Hitherto he had sought this by fits and starts to mitigate his own condition; he now resolved to cultivate it unintermittingly, and at any sacrifice.

He consequently devoted all his spare time (and 'by our Lady,' as his father would have said, also no little of his employer's) to the discovery of some precious MS. Instead of the spectacled and wizened faces which they were wont to see poring over their old wares, the bookstall-keepers of the city began to be haunted by that of William Henry, eager and young. They could not understand what his bright eyes came to seek, and certainly never dreamed that it was love that had sent him there—to my mind a very touching episode, reminding one of the difficult and uncouth tasks to which true knights in the days of romance were put, in order to show their worthiness to win those they wooed. The lady of his affections, however, was far from being sanguine of his success; she could hardly fail to appreciate his exertions, but she refrained from encouraging them. 'My dear Willie,' she said, 'it is painful to me to see you occupied in a search so fruitless. It is only too probable that what you seek has absolutely no existence. It is like hunting for the elixir of life, or the secret of turning base metals into gold.'

'But, my dear Maggie, some such literary treasure *may* exist,' he answered tenderly; 'and if I can discover it, what is the elixir of life to me will be found with it.'

It was impossible to reason with a young man like this, and Margaret tried to comfort herself with the reflection that his madness had but five months more to run. But it was very, very difficult. Her life was now far from being a [illegible]eerful one. She was not so vain as to take pleasure in a

wasted devotion, and she bitterly repented of the momentary weakness that had inclined her to feed its flame.

The house in Norfolk Street was more frequented by the learned than ever. They came to discuss Mr. Erin's late visit to the Shakespearean shrine, just as faithful Moslems might come to interview some pious friend who had recently made his pilgrimage to Mecca. While they talked of relics and signatures her mind reverted to the sweet-smelling old garden at Shottery, with its settle outside the cottage door. Frank Dennis came as usual, and was made welcome by his host, if not quite with the same heartiness as of old. Not a word of love passed his lips, and he was even more reserved and silent than of yore; but Margaret could not conceal from herself what he came for. Nay, his very reticence had a significance for her; she had a suspicion that he had noticed some change of manner between herself and her cousin which for the present sealed his lips. When he had quite convinced himself that her heart was in another's keeping she felt that he would go away, and that place by the window, where he usually sat a little apart from the antiquarian circle, would know him no more. She pitied him as she pitied Willie, though in another way. She recognised in him some noble qualities—gentleness, modesty, a love of truth and justice, and a generosity of heart that extended even to a rival. If she had not known William Henry, it might have been possible to her, she sometimes thought, to have loved Frank Dennis. But this was only when the former was not present. At the end of the day, when her cousin came in fagged and dispirited, and took his place at the supper-table with little notice from anyone, her whole soul seemed to go forth to meet him in her tender eyes.

Matters thus continued for some weeks, till, rather suddenly, a change took place in William Henry. In some respects it was not for the better; the unrest which his features had hitherto displayed disappeared, and was succeeded by an earnest and almost painful gravity. Once only she had seen such an expression—on the face of a

juggler in the street, one evening, who had thrown knives into the air and caught them as they fell. But with it there was a certain new-born hope. She recognised it in the looks he stole at her when he thought himself unobserved, and in his talk and manner to others, especially to Mr. Erin. They suggested confidence, or at least a purpose. That he said nothing of what he had in his mind to her was in itself significant. The conclusion she drew was that he was on the track of some discovery which might or might not prove of great importance. Poor fellow! she had too often seen her uncle and his friends led by wildfire of this sort to the brink of disappointment to put much faith in it. They were old and used to failures, and with a little grunt of disappointment settled their wigs upon their foreheads, and started off again at a jog-trot in search of another mare's-nest. Whereas to Willie—he was but seventeen—Repulse would seem like Ruin.

One evening—it was a Saturday, on which day Mr. Erin was accustomed to entertain a few friends of his own way of thinking—William Henry made his appearance later than usual. The guests had already sat down to table, and were in full tide of talk, which was not in any way interrupted by his arrival. Margaret as usual cast a swift furtive glance at him, and at once perceived that something had happened. His face was pale, even paler than usual, but his eyes were very bright and restless; a peculiar smile played about his mouth. 'He has found something' was the thought that flashed at once across her mind. Even if he had, she felt it would not really alter matters, and would only tend to nourish false hopes. Her uncle's heart would never soften towards him in the way that he hoped for. A compelled expression of approbation, an unwilling tribute to his diligence and judgment, born of self-congratulation on the acquisition of some literary treasure, *would be* his reward at best, but still—but still—her heart *went pit-a-pat. She knew* that no good fortune of the [illegible]*inary kind could* have happened to him. Mr. Bingley,

though he liked the boy, could hardly have promised to make him his partner; nor indeed, if he had, would it have mattered much, since his business was so small as to require but a single clerk. That he had found a publisher for his poems was not less unlikely, while the result of such a miracle would be of even less material advantage.

Throughout the meal William Henry scarcely touched bit or sup; his air, to the one observer of it, gave the impression of intense but suppressed excitement.

It was the custom of Mr. Erin's company on Saturday nights to share after supper a bowl of punch between them, and for those who affected tobacco to light up their long clays. Both the drinking and smoking were of a very moderate kind; while of song-singing, very common at that date, there was none. There was only one toast, given by the host in reverent tones, 'To the memory of the immortal Shakespeare,' and then they began to wrangle over disputed readings. On these occasions it was William Henry's habit to quietly withdraw and seek Margaret in the withdrawing-room. As often as not, Frank Dennis did the like, when he would petition for a tune on the harpsichord, a thing the other never did. Margaret's voice was music enough for him, especially in a *tête-à-tête*. But on this particular Saturday both young men remained with the rest, William Henry for a reason of his own, and Dennis out of courtesy to his host, who had promised to give his friends that night an antiquarian treat, consisting of the exhibition of a rare tract he had recently acquired. It was entitled 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' and full of engraved plates, to the outsider as destitute of interest as dinner-plates with nothing on them, but to this little band of antiquaries as the 'meat' of turtle to an alderman. If they didn't say grace afterwards, it was because this precious gift had been vouchsafed to another and not to themselves; they sighed and murmured to themselves that 'Erin ought to be a happy man.' Having received their compliments with much complacency, their host, *like an old man* congratulated upon the possession of a

young wife, locked the extract in his bookcase and put the key into his pocket, which was taken by the rest as a signal for departure. When they had all gone save Dennis, who, as a friend of the house, was always the last to go, William Henry drew from his breast pocket a piece of parchment with two seals hanging from it on slips.

'I think, sir,' said he modestly, 'I have something rather curious to show you.'

'Eh, what?' said Mr. Erin, knitting his brow in the depreciating manner peculiar to the examiner of all curios before purchase, 'some old deed or another, I suppose.'

Then he turned very white and eager, and sat down with the document spread out before him. It was a note of hand of the usual kind, though of ancient date, and dealing with a very small sum of money; but if it had been a letter from a solicitor's office acquainting him with the fact that he had been bequeathed ten thousand pounds, it could not have aroused in him greater interest and astonishment.

It ran as follows:—'One month from the date hereof I doe promyse to paye to my good and worthy friend John Hemynge the sum of five pounds and five shillings, English Moneye, as a recompense for his great trouble in settling and doinge much for me at the Globe Theatre, as also for hys trouble in going down for me to Stratford. —Witness my hand, 'WILLIAM SHAKESPERE.

'September the Nynth, 1589.'

'Received of Master William Shakespeare the sum of five pounds and five shillings, good English Money, this Nynth day of October, 1589.

'JOHN HEMYNGE.'

'This is indeed a most marvellous discovery, William Henry,' said Mr. Erin, breaking a long silence, and regarding his son with a sort of devout amazement, such as might have been exhibited by some classic shepherd of

old on finding the Tityrus he had been treating as a chawbacon was first cousin to Apollo. 'You are certainly a most fortunate young man.—Maggie' (for Maggie, learning that the visitors had departed, had joined them, full of vague expectancy), 'see what your cousin has brought home with him.'

This appeal of Mr. Erin to his niece was significant in many ways. It would have been most natural in such a matter to have turned to Dennis, but for the moment he could not brook incredulity, nor even a critical examination of the precious manuscript. Moreover, he had said 'your cousin,' a relationship between the two young people to which he had never before alluded. It was plain that within the last five minutes William Henry had come nearer to the old man's heart than he had been able to get in seventeen years.

What followed was even still more expressive, for it took for granted an intimacy between his son and niece, which up to that moment he had studiously ignored.

'Did you know anything,' he added, 'my girl, of this surprise which your cousin had in store for us?'

'I knew that there was something, uncle, though not from his lips. That is,' she continued, with a faint flush, 'I felt for days that there has been something upon William Henry's mind, which I judged to be good news.—Was it not so, Willie?'

The young man bowed his head. The colour came into his face also. 'How she must have watched him, and how rightly she had read his thoughts!' was what he was saying to himself.

Mr. Erin took no notice of either of them; his mind had reverted to the new-found treasure.

'Look at it, Dennis,' he cried. 'The seals and paper are quite as they should be. I have no doubt of its being a genuine deed of the time. Then the signature—there are only two others in all the world, but I do think—just take this microscope' (his own hand trembled so that he could scarcely hold it), 'there can be no mistake about it.

It is without the "a," but it can be proved that he spelt it indifferently; and again, the receipt *has* the "a," an inconsistency which, in the case of a forgery, would certainly not have been overlooked. There can be no doubt of its being a genuine signature, can there?'

'That is a matter on which you are infinitely better qualified to judge than I am, Mr. Erin,' was the cautious rejoinder. 'Perhaps you had better consult the autograph in Johnson and Steevens's edition.'

'Tush! Do you suppose that I have not every stroke and turn of it in my mind's eye? Reach down the book, Maggie.'

Margaret, who knew where to lay her hand upon every book in her uncle's library, made haste to produce the volume.

'There, did not I tell you?' said Mr. Erin triumphantly. 'Look at the *W*, look at the *S*.'

Dennis did look at them very carefully. 'Yes,' he admitted, 'there is no doubt that they are fac-similes.'

'Fac-similes!' exclaimed the old man angrily; 'why not frankly say that they are by the same hand at once?'

'But that is begging the whole question,' argued Dennis, his honest and implastic nature leading him into the selfsame error into which he had fallen at Charlecote Park. 'It is surely more likely upon the whole that an autograph purporting to be Shakespeare's should be a fac-simile than an original.'

'Or, in other words,' answered Mr. Erin, with a burst of indignation, 'it is more likely that this lad here, poor William Henry' (the 'poor' sounded almost like 'poor dear'), 'should have imposed upon us than not.'

'Oh no, oh no,' interposed Margaret earnestly; 'I am sure that Mr. Dennis never meant to suggest that.'

'Then what the deuce did he mean by his fac-simile?' ejaculated the antiquary, with irritation. 'Look at the up-strokes; look at the down-strokes.'

'You have made an accusation against me, Mr. Erin,' said Frank Dennis, speaking under strong emotion,

'which is at once most cruel and undeserved. If I thought myself capable of doing an injury to William Henry, or especially of sowing any suspicion of him in your mind, I—I would go and drown myself in the river yonder.'

Mr. Erin only said, 'Umph,' in such a tone that it sounded like 'Then go and do it.'

'How is it possible that in throwing any doubt upon the genuineness of that document,' continued the other, 'I should be imputing anything to its finder? Nor, indeed, have I cast any doubt on it. I know nothing about it.'

'Then why offer an opinion?' put in the old man implacably.

'At all events, sir, I hazarded none as to how the thing came into William Henry's possession.'

'Tut, tut,' replied the antiquary, once more reverting to the precious document, 'who cares how he got it? The point is that we have it here; not only Shakespeare's handwriting, but a most incontestable proof, to such as ever doubted it, of his honour and punctuality in discharge of his just debts. William Henry, I have been mistaken in you, my lad. I will honestly confess that I had built no such hopes upon you. When I lost my poor Samuel [a son that died in infancy], I never thought to be made happy by anything a boy could do again. This is the proudest moment of my life—to have under my own roof, to see with my own eyes, to touch with my own fingers, the actual handwriting of William Shakespeare.'

Then, with a sigh like one who returns to another something he himself fain would keep, as knowing far more how to value it, he folded up the document, and returned it to William Henry.

'Nay, sir,' said the lad, gently breaking silence for the first time, 'it is yours, not mine. My pleasure in acquiring it—for, to say the truth, it cost me nothing—would all be lost if you refused to accept it.'

'What, as a gift? No, my boy, that is impossible. I don't mean that you must take cash for it,' for William Henry looked both abashed and disturbed, 'but something that will at least show you that I am not ungrateful.'

For one wild instant the young man believed that, like a stage father, Mr. Erin was about to place Margaret's hand in his and dower them with his blessing, but he only walked to his bookcase, and took from the shelf, where it had just been reverently laid, 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' and pushed it into his hands.

'But, sir, you have not heard how I gained possession of the deed,' exclaimed the astonished recipient of this treasure.

'To-morrow, to-morrow,' answered the antiquary as he left the room with the document hugged to his heart; 'to-morrow will be time enough for details.'

In his heart of hearts he feared lest there should be some flaw in the young man's story which might throw discredit upon the genuineness of his discovery: and, for that night at least, he wished to enjoy his acquisition without the shadow of a doubt.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW TO GET RID OF A COMPANY.

When Mr. Erin had closed the door behind him there was silence among those he had left; Dennis and Margaret naturally looked to William Henry for an explanation of so singular a scene, but he only turned over the leaves of 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' with an amused expression of countenance.

'*This* reminds me,' he observed presently, '*of what one of Mr. Bingley's* female clients did the other day. *She had a favourite* cat, which one of her toadies used to

extol in order to curry favour with her; and when she died she left him *that*, as being the richest legacy she could think of; her mere money went to a hospital.'

Margaret gave him a look which seemed to reproach him for his frivolity, and Dennis remarked gravely enough, 'I do hope there is no mistake about that deed of yours, my lad; for I am afraid it would be a terrible blow to your father.'

'Deed of mine!' exclaimed the young man indignantly. 'How on earth can I tell whether it is genuine or not?'

'That is very true,' said Margaret, 'how can he? We must hope for the best. Now tell us where you found it, Willie, and all about it.'

'Well, it's a queer story, I promise you, and I can only give you my word of honour for the truth of it.'

'I should hope that would be enough,' said Margaret confidently.

'It will be enough for you, Maggie,' said the young man quietly, 'but I am very doubtful whether it will be sufficient for others, since even to myself it would still seem like a dream save for the documentary evidence. If that is right, as Mr. Erin seems to think, all is right.'

'And for that you are not responsible,' put in Margaret eagerly.

'Just so; I know no more about it being Shakespeare's genuine signature than you do. How the thing came into my hands was this way. You know the "Horn" Tavern in Fleet Street, Dennis?'

'Well, of course. Did I not dine with you ten days ago there?'

'Nay; let us be accurate throughout. I dined with *you*,' said the young man, smiling. 'And that reminds me of what I had forgotten before; it was on that very day that I first met my friend. Did you notice an old gentleman with a flaxen wig dining by himself in the corner?—indeed, I know you did, for we remarked that it *was rather early* in the day for a man to be drinking port.

'I remember your making the observation,' answered Dennis; 'but I cannot recall the gentleman; I did not notice him with any particularity.'

'Nor I. But it seems that he noticed *me*. I took my mid-day meal there the next day, and there he was again. We sat at adjoining tables, and he entered into conversation with me. His manner was at first a little stiff and reticent, like that of an old bachelor who lives alone; but something I said about Child's bank seemed to attract his attention. He was not aware that the accounts for the sale of Dunkirk had been found among their papers, and seemed more astonished that I should know it. Again, it amazed him to find that I knew about Chaucer's having beaten the Franciscan Friar in Fleet Street. Being ignorant, of course, of the set of people I have been brought up amongst here, it doubtless astonished him that so young a man should take any interest in such matters. He said he was but an indifferent antiquary himself, from an incurable habit of indolence, which had grown upon him during years of seclusion, but that his tastes had at one time lain in that direction; that he possessed a considerable collection of manuscripts bequeathed to him by a cousin, and that if I liked to look in upon him at his chambers in the Temple, I might perhaps find something worthy of my attention.

'Of course I availed myself of this invitation. I found my friend in an unusually large set of chambers, but which had the appearance of great neglect. The rooms he occupied himself were well cared for enough, though he informed me that he saw no company; but the others were used as lumber-rooms. They were filled with old books, old armour, old manuscripts, piled up on the floor in the greatest confusion. There were heaps of law documents, relating to his own affairs, which had no better treatment. I suppose my new friend saw by the expression of my face that I thought him a very eccentric personage, for he suddenly observed, "I have taken a strong fancy to you, young gentleman, and I am not

easily pleased; but there is one thing which you must beware of if you want our friendship to continue. I cannot be troubled with questions. The man who left me all these things was worried to death by the curiosity of other people. 'Where did you get this? How did that come into your hands?' and so on. There are some things here my possession of which would be so envied by some people, that I should never have a moment's peace from their importunities. If you should come across any such treasure, and should reveal the place where you found it, you and I part company. Let that be thoroughly understood between us." Of course I promised never to mention his name or address to any one.'

As William Henry paused a moment to take breath, 'That will be rather awkward,' observed Dennis gravely; 'of course there is no help for it, but your inability to give a reference as to the discovery of the deeds will give rise to suspicion.'

'Suspicion of what?' inquired Margaret, with a flush on her cheek.

'Of the authenticity of the document. I should rather have said would strengthen suspicion, for that there will be objectors to it is certain.'

'My cousin has nothing to do with them,' said Margaret; 'surely he is not personally answerable for the genuineness of the deed.'

'Certainly not,' answered Dennis gently.

'Pray go on, Willie,' said Margaret. It was plain that what Dennis had said had annoyed her in some way; not only was he himself, however, quite unconscious of the cause of offence, but William Henry appeared equally in the dark. He glanced from one to the other with a puzzled look before he took up his tale.

'I have paid several visits to the Templar, as I will call him, since then, and he has been most kind and hospitable. As my time is not my own, and I can only occasionally leave the office, he has lent me a latch-key, so that I may enter his chambers when I please, and

pursue my researches. In order, as I believe, to remove from me any unpleasant sense of obligation, he has asked me to catalogue his library for him; which is, of course, a labour of love.'

'Why, my good lad, it is evident the old gentleman intends to adopt you, and will make you his heir,' exclaimed Dennis.

Though he spoke laughingly Margaret thought to herself that such an event was by no means out of the range of possibility. Her cousin was certainly very attractive; had excellent manners, and, as it happened, the somewhat exceptional tastes that were most likely to recommend him to such a patron. Perhaps the future that Willie had proposed to her in the garden at Shottery might not turn out so wild a dream after all.

'I think my new friend has done enough for me as it is,' said William Henry modestly. 'In turning over some deeds yesterday I found that document which I brought home to-night. Mr. ——, I mean the Templar—was not at home, so that I had to wait till I could see him this afternoon. You may imagine what a twenty-four hours I passed.'

'I noticed, as I told my uncle, that you had something on your mind,' said Margaret; 'but that has been for some days. No doubt it was this making acquaintance with your new friend, and the possibilities that might arise from it.'

'No doubt. I confess I allowed myself to indulge in certain hopes,' returned the young man with a smile, but keeping his eyes fixed on the ground. 'What has happened, however—always supposing that the document is genuine—has been far beyond my expectations. When I met my patron and told him what I had found he was surprised enough, but by no means in that state of elation which we have just seen in Mr. Erin; the reason of which was, I am convinced, that he at once made up his mind to *give me the thing*.

'"*It is very curious*," he said. "My cousin always

set great store by those old manuscripts, but I did not know there was anything among them so interesting as this. Perhaps you may find some more; at all events, since but for you this discovery would certainly not have been made, or at least not in my lifetime, it is but fair that you should reap the benefit of it. This note of hand is yours."'

'What a gracious gentleman!' exclaimed Margaret enthusiastically. 'It was not as if he did not know the value of what he was giving away.'

'Just so. I am afraid, though I begged him to reconsider the matter, that I was not very urgent that he should do so. I could not help picturing to myself how Mr. Erin would receive such a treasure, and how it might be the means'—here he hesitated a moment—'of—making myself more acceptable to him.'

Dennis patted the lad on the shoulder approvingly. He understood that in his presence it was painful to the young fellow to allude to his father's habitually cold and unpaternal behaviour. What he did not understand was that William Henry should resent this friendly encouragement as being the manner of a mature man to a junior.

Margaret for her part attributed her cousin's hesitation to another cause. She felt that if they had been alone together he would have ended that last sentence--'how it might be the means of'—in a different way.

'In the end, of course,' continued William Henry, smiling, 'I took what the gods had given me without much scruple; but even if nothing more should come of it, I hope I shall never forget the old gentleman's kindness.'

Nothing under the circumstances could be more moderate, or in better taste, than the speaker's manner. Not only was there no exultation, such as might easily have been excused in a man so young, and, moreover, so unaccustomed to good fortune, but he seemed to have resolutely determined not to encourage himself in expectation; and yet there was a confidence in his tone which to one at least of those who listened to him was very significant. If it is

too much to say that pretty Margaret had repented of that promise given to her cousin at Anne Hathaway's cottage, she had certainly thought it very unhopeful; or rather it would be more correct to say she had abstained from thinking of its possible results at all; but that night she could not shut them out from her dreams.

Mr. Samuel Erin would probably have also had his dreams—not less agreeable, though of quite another kind—but unfortunately he never went to sleep. Like Belshazzar, he beheld all night a writing on the wall, which, albeit it was not in modern characters, needed in his case no interpreter. It was Shakespeare's autograph. It seemed to him to be inscribed everywhere, and, as though the secret of luminous paint had already been discovered, to shine miraculously out of the darkness.

He came down to the morning meal with a face of unwonted paleness, but which, when it turned to William Henry, wore also an unwonted smile. He listened to his narration of how he became possessed of the deed with interest, but without much comment, and yet not a word did he say about the precious document itself. His silence, however, was well understood. There would that day be a gathering of his Shakespeare friends, who would decide upon its genuineness; but in the meantime it was clear that he had a firm and cheerful faith in it such as men pray for so often in vain. For the first time for years he addressed his conversation almost wholly to his son, and even recalled events connected with the young man's childhood. On later matters perhaps it was scarcely safe to venture, lest memories of a less cheerful kind should be raked up with them.

'Do you remember, my boy, the days when we were wont to spout Macbeth together, and how you had to hold up the paper-knife in your little hand and say, "Is this a dagger that I see before me?"'

William Henry remembered them very well, and said so. It was curious enough that Shakespeare should be the one common ground they had discovered on which to meet on terms of amity.

Then presently, 'Have you heard anything of young Talbot lately?'

Talbot had been that schoolfellow of William Henry already spoken of, who was a poetaster like himself. More fortunate, however, in worldly circumstances, he had succeeded to a small estate in Ireland, where he lived, save when he occasionally came to London for a week or two for pleasure. On one occasion William Henry had ventured to bring the young man to Norfolk Street, but he had been received with such scant civility by the master of the house that the visit had not been repeated. That Mr. Erin should have given himself the trouble to recall his name spoke volumes of Shakespearean autograph.

'Thank you, sir; Talbot is to be in town for a few days at the "Blue Boar" in the Strand, I believe.'

'I beg if you see him, then, that you will give him my compliments,' said Mr. Erin graciously.

The transformation was quite magical. It was as though some humble wight dwelling in the shadow of King Bulcinoso's displeasure had suddenly become first favourite, and, instead of receiving buffets, had been given his Majesty's hand to kiss.

Margaret had never liked her uncle so much as in this new character, and was indignant with her cousin that he did not respond to his father's kindness with more enthusiasm.

'If he had behaved so to me, Willie, I should have met him halfway,' she afterwards said reprovingly.

'Yes,' answered the young man gravely, 'because you would have known that he loved you for your own sake.' Then with a gentle sigh he added, 'Why don't *you* meet *me* halfway, Maggie?'

She did not indeed reply as he would have had her, but her tender glance betrayed that if she had not got halfway, she was on the road to meet him.

He went away to his work as usual, but by no means in his usual frame of mind. Nor were those he left behind him less moved by his late proceedings than himself.

Before midday the parlour in Norfolk Street was the reception-room of quite a throng of dilettanti, some summoned that very morning by Mr. Erin's special invitation. The new-found deed was handed round among these enthusiasts as a new-born babe, heir to millions, but about whom there are some doubts as to its legitimacy, might be received by a select circle of female gossips, while the proprietor, like a husband confident in his wife's fidelity, regards their investigations with a complacent smile. They examined it tenderly but with great caution, through spectacles of every description, and in silence befitting so momentous an occasion; yet by their countenances, lit by a certain 'fearful joy,' it was easy to see that upon the whole they were satisfied—nay, glutted—by the inspection.

'Well, gentlemen?' inquired Mr. Erin, with mock humility—a mere pretence of submission to a possible adverse opinion. 'What say you, my dear Sir Frederick? what is your verdict?'

He had appealed to one Sir Frederick Eden, a Shakespearean critic of no mean distinction, and who, being the only titled person present, might naturally be considered as the foreman of the jury.

'It is my opinion, Mr. Erin,' replied that gentleman with great solemnity, 'that this most interesting document is valid.'

A hushed murmur of corroboration and applause broke from the little throng. 'That is my view also,' said one; 'And mine,' 'And mine,' added other voices.

If Mr. Erin had just been elected King of Great Britain and Ireland (with the Empire of India thrown in by anticipation), and was receiving the first act of allegiance from the representatives of the nation, he could not have looked more gratified and serene.

'That is certainly the conclusion,' he observed with modesty, 'which I myself have arrived at.'

Then he told how William Henry had become possessed of the document, a narration which redoubled their interest and excitement.

'Sir,' said Sir Frederick, with emotion, 'I felicitate you on the possession of such a son.'

There were reasons, as we know, which made this congratulation a mere matter of compliment, and, up to this time, by no means an acceptable one; but it was with no little pride and satisfaction that Mr. Erin now acknowledged it.

'He is a good lad,' he said, 'a discreet and well-ordered lad; and, of course, it is very gratifying to me that he has found favour in the eyes of this gentleman—whoever he may be—to whom we are indebted for this—this manifestation.'

It was a strange word to use, but, under the circumstances, not an inappropriate one. To Mr. Samuel Erin the occurrence in question seemed indeed little less than a miracle, and William Henry the instrument through which it had been vouchsafed to his wondering eyes.

'What we have to consider,' he continued, dropping his voice in hushed solemnity, 'is that, in all probability, other papers connected with the immortal bard may be produced from the same source.'

The company nodded their wigs in unison. It was as though in their mind's eye a dish of peaches had been placed on the table before them; their very mouths watered.

'There is one circumstance,' said Sir Frederick, who still held the document in his hands, rather to his host's discomfort, who well knew what temptation was, and had become anxious for the return of his property, 'which I think has hitherto escaped our notice: in examining the document we have neglected the seals. I have just discovered by close scrutiny that they represent that ancient game the quintin. Here is the upright beam, here is the bar, here is the bag.'

The company crowded round, most of them with magnifying glasses, which gave them the appearance of beetles who, with projecting eyes and solemn looks, investigate for the first time some new and promising article of food.

'At the top of the seal, if I am not mistaken,' continued Sir Frederick in pompous tones, and with the air of a man without whose intelligence a great discovery would have passed unnoticed, 'you will recognise the ring, to unhook which with his lance was the object of the tilter; if he failed to accomplish it, the bar, moving swiftly on its pivot, swung round the bag, which striking smartly on the tilter's back, was almost certain of unhorsing him.'

'We see it—it is here; there is no doubt of it,' gasped the excited company.

'Now, mark you, this is not only curious,' resumed the knight, 'but corroborative of the genuineness of the document in a very high degree. Observe the very close analogy which this instrument bears to the name of Shakespeare. Is it not almost certain, therefore, that this seal belonged to our immortal bard, and was always used by him in his legal transactions?'

'Then rose the hushed amaze of hand and eye.' For some moments no voice broke the awful silence; but presently, under deep emotion, Mr. Erin spoke.

'A revelation,' he said, 'always needs an expounder, and in our friend Sir Frederick we have found one.—Thanks to your keen intelligence, sir, the value of this deed has been placed beyond all question.'

'I am very glad to have been of some slight service to the cause of literary discovery,' returned Sir Frederick modestly. 'Perhaps some other lights may strike me if you will allow me to take the document home with me.'

'Indeed I will do nothing of the kind,' put in Mr. Erin precipitately; 'not, of course, my dear friend, that I have the least doubt of your good faith,' he added in gentler tones, 'but in justice to my son—unhappily absent, and to whom it belongs—I can hardly suffer the deed to leave my custody. Perhaps at another time'—for his friend was looking anything but pleased—'your request shall be complied with, but at present it must be

here for the satisfaction of doubters. Such a person, I have reason to believe, is among us even now.'

A murmur of indignation arose from all sides. They cast at one another such furious glances as the Thracian nymphs may have done before tearing Orpheus to pieces.

'Yes, Mr. Dennis,' continued the host sarcastically, addressing the unhappy Frank, who had hitherto remained unnoticed and quiescent, 'I have reason to believe from the expression of your features, when I connect it with certain remarks that fell from you in Shottery Park the other day, that you are our only sceptic.'

If to an assembly of divines in Convocation 'the Infidel,' so often alluded to in the abstract in their discourses from the pulpit, had been suddenly presented to them in the concrete, they could not have looked at him with a greater horror than that with which the company regarded the young man thus thrust upon their attention.

'Indeed, indeed, Mr. Erin,' pleaded Dennis, 'I have never uttered a syllable that could be construed, or even perverted, into doubt.'

'One may look daggers and yet speak none,' returned Mr. Erin with severity (and that he should thus venture to misquote his favourite bard showed even more than his tone the perturbation of his mind). 'The document, however, will be left here—*here*,' he repeated significantly, 'for your private scrutiny and investigation; I only trust that you may find cause to withdraw your aspersions, groundless in themselves, as they are disparaging to my dear son William Henry, and offensive to this respectable and learned company, about, as I see with regret, to take their leave.'

If Mr. Erin had suddenly seized a hammer and smote him on the forehead, Mr. Dennis could hardly have been more astonished than at this gratuitous onslaught. He resolved to wait till the company had dispersed, which, at that broad hint received from its host, it proceeded to do, and then demand an explanation.

Mr. Erin, however, anticipated him. 'I was some-

what more vehement, Dennis,' he said, 'in the remarks that I addressed to you just now than the occasion demanded; but the fact is, some sort of diversion was imperatively demanded. My friends, I saw, were getting turbulent; the discovery of the quintin on the seal was too much for them, already excited as they were by the exhibition of this extraordinary document. Sir Frederick in particular, under circumstances of such extreme temptation, I knew to be capable of any outrage. I made you —I confess it—the scapegoat, by means of which the safety of the precious manuscript has been secured. In compensation, take it and look at it as long as you like. What I said about your incredulity, though somewhat justified by the past, you must admit, was in the main but a pious fraud. Like any man of intelligence, you cannot but revere the document. It is yours, say, for the next five minutes. Then it goes into my iron case, for "who shall be true to us," as he whose honoured name lies there before you, in his own handwriting, has observed, "if we be unsecret to ourselves?"'

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

ALTHOUGH it may be very true that kings can affect but little the happiness of their subjects, the petty kings of every household—from Paterfamilias the First down to his latest descendants—have a very important influence in that way. The difference which a morose or cheerful parent makes in the lives of those beneath their roof is incalculable. In the one case the atmosphere of existence is all cloud; in the other, all sunshine. It must be confessed that up to this period the Jupiter of the little household in Norfolk Street had been something of a *Jupiter Pluvius.* There were storms, there were tears;

and even when it was not so, the domestic sky was sullen. From the date of the discovery, however, of that note of hand, from William Shakespeare to John Hemynge, the weather cleared. Moreover, matters looked all the brighter by contrast. It is one of the many advantages that selfish persons of strong will possess, that when they do condescend to be genial, people are prone to believe that they always were so, or at all events that they have misjudged them in setting them down as churlish.

> So in the Orient, when the gracious light
> Lifts up his long-hid head, each under eye
> Doth homage to this new appearing sight,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> And mortal looks adore his majesty.

Mr. Erin's domestics began to acknowledge that their master was not half a bad fellow; and his niece, to whom, however, it is but fair to say he had always been kind, was quite triumphant over his new-found good nature. 'Now, Willie, did I not always tell you so?' &c., while Frank Dennis had reason to believe that he had at last been quite forgiven his heretical doubts as to whether deer could shed tears as easily as their antlers.

As to William Henry himself, the strides he had made in Mr. Erin's favour, thanks to that 'find' of his in the 'Templar's' chambers, was something magical, as if he had got seven-league boots on. His father even called him Samuel, as though he were verily and indeed that son he had lost with all the hopes that were wrapped up in him. It must be confessed, however, that this may have been partly owing to the birth of new hopes; William Henry, indeed, though he had twice visited his friend in the Temple since that one momentous occasion, had found nothing very new—or rather very old—there; but, on the other hand, what Mr. Erin justly thought a great piece of good fortune, and one that showed promise of much more, had befallen him. On looking over his patron's papers he came across a deed of no great antiquity in truth, but which to that gentleman himself was especially valuable,

since it established his right to a certain property that had long been the subject of litigation. For this, something was certainly due to the young man himself, since, but for his legal learning and knowledge of the nature of the document, he might easily have passed it over as being of no importance. It was, therefore, not so very surprising that the old gentleman, in a sudden glow of gratitude, for which his mind, from its natural leaning towards the young fellow, was, as it were, 'ready laid,' had given him a promise that whatever he might henceforth discover among his papers of general interest should, by way of recompense for the service he had rendered him, become his own.

Gladly as William Henry himself doubtless received this mark of his patron's favour, his joy could hardly have exceeded that of Mr. Erin when the news was communicated to him. It must needs be confessed, however, that his gratitude was not wholly dissociated from a sense of favours to come.

'Why, my dear lad,' he cried, 'this note of hand of Shakespeare's, priceless as it is, may be yet outdone by what remains to be discovered. In this strange treasure-trove of which you speak, of the contents of which, both as to their nature and value, their owner seems to be wholly ignorant, there may be, for all we know, whole letters in Shakespeare's handwriting, copies of his plays, a sonnet or two, possibly even the skeleton of some play which he never filled in with flesh-and-blood characters, the hint of some divine tragedy—gracious Goodness!' and Mr. Erin threw up his hands in speechless ecstasy, as though a glimpse of heaven had been vouchsafed to him of which it was not lawful for him to discourse further.

'Of course it is possible, sir,' returned William Henry gravely. 'But for my part I dare not trust myself to think of what may be lying in yonder lumber-rooms. *Just now,* indeed, I am giving my attention solely to my *patron's library,* arranging the bookshelves and making *out the catalogue.* After his generous promise I pur-

posely forego the pleasure of investigation, lest I should be considered grasping.'

'Fire!' interrupted the old man suddenly, with tremulous anxiety. 'Think of fire! You know what happened at Clopton House; and though of course your patron would never wilfully destroy a scrap of paper with any antiquity about it, yet who can guard against accident—carelessness? One spark from a candle, and the world may be robbed of we know not what. Oh, my dear lad, for the world's sake, if not for mine, I pray you lose no time. Never mind your work; I'll settle all that with Bingley. Stick to the lumber-room—I mean the precious manuscripts.

"Dull not device by coldness and delay."'

The eagerness of the old man was in its intensity quite touching. No lover entreating his mistress for the momentous monosyllable could have been more earnest, or even more passionate. William Henry himself, who throughout the late stirring incidents, which promised to affect his future so nearly, had kept himself studiously calm and quiet, was deeply moved.

'I will do my best, sir,' he replied in agitated tones; 'nothing pleases me better than to give you pleasure.'

'That is well said,' returned the old man graciously. Margaret looked on with approving eyes. Supposing even what the young man had so rashly set his heart on should bear no fruit—if his dream should not be realised—it was surely well that such friendly relations should be established between him and the man who, if not his own flesh and blood, was his natural protector. It was very satisfactory also to see that Willie was responding to Mr. Erin's overtures of good-will.

As to these last, there could be no doubt as to her uncle's change of front towards her cousin (to whom indeed he had hitherto shown no front at all, but had turned his back upon him); and that very evening there was another proof of it. As the three were sitting down

to supper, William Henry noticed that the table was laid for four. Under ordinary circumstances he would have taken it for granted that Dennis was coming, but he knew that the architect was out of town on business. He was not yet on such intimate terms with the master of the house as to inquire who was the expected guest, and supposed him to be one of the Shakespearean literati who were now dropping in at all times.

Presently there was a knock at the door, whereat Margaret looked at her uncle with a significant smile, and her uncle looked at William Henry.

'I have got a pleasant surprise for you, my lad,' he said gaily. 'Some time ago—indeed, it was before Maggie came to live with us—you had a friend whose companionship I thought was doing you no good, and I gave him the cold shoulder. It is never too late to own oneself in the wrong; he certainly did you no harm, and perhaps intended none. It is only natural that you should have friends of your own age, and that they should be made welcome in your father's house; so, as you told me he was in town, I sent round a note to him to ask him to drop in to-night to supper.'

Before William Henry could reply the door opened, and the servant announced Mr. Reginald Talbot.

The new-comer was a fresh-complexioned young gentleman of about eighteen or so, rather clumsily built for his age, with long reddish-brown hair and bold eyes. They did not look at all like near-sighted eyes, but he wore round his neck what was then called a quizzing-glass, held by the hand, through which he now surveyed the present company. His attire, if not more fashionable than Mr. Erin's guests were wont to wear, showed a much greater taste for colours. His waistcoat was heavily laced; and the buckles on his shoes, if, as was probable, they were not made of real diamonds, shone by candlelight as though they had been.

'It is very kind of you, Mr. Erin,' he said, ''pon honour, to let me drop in in this way. If I had known

that there were ladies present'—here he glanced at Margaret and bowed like a dancing-master—'I would have put on more suitable apparel.'

'Pooh, pooh! you're smart enough,' said Mr. Erin in a tone in which contempt and politeness struggled ludicrously for the upper hand. 'This is only my niece, Margaret Slade; there's your old friend, William Henry. Didn't I say, my lad'—here he turned to his son and clapped him on the shoulder—'that I had got a surprise for you?'

Of course Mr. Erin had meant it well, just as he had done when he had made him that priceless present of 'Stokes, the Vaulting Master,' but, as in that case, it would have seemed to a close observer that he had not exactly hit upon the meed of merit most to William Henry's fancy. That young gentleman shook hands indeed with the new-comer cordially enough, but, whether from surprise or some other cause, could at first find no better topic to converse upon than the weather.

'I suppose,' he said, 'you have not been having much more sun where you have come from than we have had.'

'Sun!' echoed the other drily. 'I suppose there is not much difference in the weather of Norfolk Street and that of the Strand. I have been in London, as I wrote to you I should be, these ten days, and not a hundred yards away, if you had cared to come and see me.'

'I didn't understand that from your letter,' stammered William Henry. 'I thought——'

'I think I can explain this matter, Mr. Talbot,' interposed Mr. Erin; 'satisfactorily as far as William Henry is concerned, if somewhat to my own disadvantage. Under a misconception which it is unnecessary to explain, I had tacitly forbidden my son to visit you. I am sorry for it. I hope you will now make up for it by seeing a good deal of one another while you remain in town.'

'You're very good, I'm sure,' said Talbot. He looked from father to son in a vague and puzzled way, and then he looked at Margaret through his spy-glass. The young

lady, annoyed to be so surveyed, cast down her eyes, and Mr. Erin, with some revival of his old caustic tone, inquired, 'Do you propose to deprive your friends at home of your society for any length of time?'

'A week or two, perhaps more,' returned the other, without a shade of annoyance; he had evidently taken his host's remark *au sérieux*. 'I am come up on business of my own,' he added grandly; 'for as to old Docket, though my articles are not yet run out, I treat him as I please.'

'You are in the fortunate position of having a competence of your own, I conclude.'

'Well, yes; that is, I come into it on my majority. Something in land and also in hand. I shall then leave the law and pursue the profession of a man of letters.'

'Heaven deliver us!' ejaculated Mr. Erin.

'Sir?' exclaimed the visitor.

'And make us thankful for all its mercies,' added his host, bending over his plate.

'I beg pardon; grace,' muttered Mr. Talbot, growing red to the roots of his hair.

Margaret reddened too, for it was not usual with her uncle to say grace; and William Henry reddened also with suppressed laughter. He had not given his father credit for so much dexterity.

'And now I dare say, William Henry, you would like a talk with your old friend in your own room,' observed Mr. Erin; 'you must make Mr. Talbot quite at home here.'

The young gentleman looked as if he would quite as soon have remained in the society of Miss Margaret, who had obviously attracted his admiration, while William Henry could hardly repress a groan. But so broad a hint could scarcely be ignored, and the two young men retreated together accordingly.

'I hope William Henry is pleased, my dear,' said the old gentleman, when he found himself alone with his niece. 'He cannot say that I have not made some little sacrifice. But why had he not been to see this fellow? I gave him leave.'

'Nay, sir, you did not give him leave implicitly; you said that if he met Mr. Talbot he was to give him your compliments. Willie is always so very particular not to overstep your permission in any way.'

Mr. Erin muttered an articulate sound such as a bumble-bee makes when imprisoned between two panes of glass. It was not exactly 'hum,' but it resembled it. William Henry was now all that he could wish him to be, but there had been occasions—though, to be sure, there was now no need to think of them—when he had not been so very careful to obey the paternal commands.

'Well, I hope he appreciates my little surprise,' he murmured; '"a man of letters," forsooth! Never, never was I so pestered by a popinjay.'

CHAPTER X.

TWO POETS.

'What on earth is the meaning of all this?' was the first question that Reginald Talbot put to his friend, when they found themselves alone together.

'Of all what?' returned William Henry indifferently. 'Here are pipes, by the way; will you smoke a little tobacco?'

'There it is again,' cried Talbot; 'I say once more, what is the meaning of it? The idea of your respectable father permitting us to smoke under his roof. Why, it was only, as it were, under protest that he was wont to permit you to breathe. Then, as for me, he used to think me something worse than one of the wicked; an anomalous emanation from Grub Street; a sort of savage with cash in his pocket: whereas his tone to me now is as the honey of Hybla. What magic has wrought this change in the old curmudgeon?'

'Well, perhaps of late he has got to understand me

better, and consequently my friends,' suggested William Henry.

'Oh, *that* can't be it,' replied Talbot contemptuously; 'I should say if he knew as much about you as I did he would behave worse to you than ever. I don't mean anything offensive to you, my dear fellow,' added the speaker, for his companion's face had grown very troubled; 'on the contrary, I compliment you. It's just those qualities I admire most in you which would least recommend you to his good graces. On the other hand, if you have a fault in my eyes, it is an excess of caution. Come, be frank with me, what is the tune which has set this rhinoceros a-dancing?'

'I have had the good fortune to find an old manuscript which has put my father in high good humour.'

'And the young lady, your cousin, is she, too, enamoured of old manuscripts?'

'Well, not that I am aware of,' laughed William Henry.

'Then I congratulate you,' was the quick rejoinder; 'it is now obvious to me that she is enamoured of *you*. That her affections were bespoken in some direction from the first was plain from the manner in which she received my advances.'

'Your advances?'

'Yes. You have heard of the power of the human eye over the brute creation. Well, that is nothing to the effects of this,' he tapped his spy-glass, 'upon the sensibilities of angelic woman. I have never known it fail, except when their minds are preoccupied with another object. I am writing an epic, to be entitled "The Spy-glass," the views of which, though founded on personal experience, will be quite novel. And that reminds me, how often have we not read our poems to one another? Why have you never come to see me since I have been at the "Blue Boar"?'

'My dear fellow, as you heard my father say——' began William Henry persuasively.

'Tut, tut! I mean your *real* reason,' put in the other scornfully. 'We used to meet often enough when the rhinoceros did not dance, when he was very far from dancing. Yet now——'

'The fact is, my dear fellow,' interrupted William Henry earnestly, 'there *is* a reason.'

'I have reached that point already without a guide,' observed the other drily.

'The truth is——' pursued William Henry.

Mr. Reginald Talbot took the pipe from his mouth and laughed aloud. Certainly no diplomatic explanation could have been conducted under greater difficulties. 'Some people yearn for fame, my dear Erin,' he said; 'to others it is very undesirable to be well known, even by a single individual.'

'If you imagine I wish to deceive you, Talbot, you are quite wrong,' said William Henry firmly, 'but it is true that I cannot be so frank with you as I could wish. I have a secret which is not my own, or you may be sure that you should share it. Listen.' Then he told him the whole story of his acquaintance with the Templar and its singular result. Talbot listened to him with great attention.

'It is very curious,' he remarked when the narrative was finished, 'and certainly a great stroke of luck. But it is like a tale from the "Arabian Nights." Nay, I don't mean on the score of veracity,' for William Henry had flushed crimson, 'but from its parenthetic nature. It is a story within a story; for if you can stretch your memory so far, you began with the intention of telling me why you never came to see your old friend at the "Blue Boar"?'

'It was because I had no time, Talbot. I have to do my work at the office, and also to attend upon my new acquaintance at the Temple.'

'You must be occupied indeed; not a moment in which to say, "How-d'ye-do? Good-morrow!"'

'There were also my father's injunctions. I thought *such a fleeting* visit as you speak of would be worse than

nothing, and would cause you more annoyance than being neglected; but now my father and you are friends I will certainly find time to renew the ancient days.'

'Come, that is better. Now shall I fill up what is wanting in your explanation and make all clear?'

'If you please,' said William Henry indifferently, 'though I am not aware that there is anything more.'

'Yes, there is your cousin Margaret,' said Talbot, with a cunning air; 'you would have braved the anger of the rhinoceros and followed your own inclinations—which I flatter myself would have led you to come and see me—had his favour been no more important to you than of yore. But he holds in his hand another hand, of which he has the disposal, and therefore it behoves you to be on your best behaviour.'

'You have guessed it,' exclaimed William Henry, with admiration. 'If I thought you could have sympathised with me, as I see you do, I should have saved you the trouble of guessing.'

'Sympathise with you? When was son of the Muses indifferent to the love wound of his friend? Have we not always sympathised with one another? Does any one except yourself admire your poetry as much as I do? Can I anywhere find a friend more capable of appreciating the higher flights of mine than *you*? I have done a good deal, by-the-bye, in that way since I saw you last, Erin; not to mention six cantos of "The Spy-glass," I have written one-and-twenty songs; some of them may be useful to you if your inspiration has flagged of late, for they are all to my mistress—whose name, like yours, is fortunately in three syllables—a madrigal or two, and a number of miscellaneous pieces, chiefly satirical. To-morrow—you said to-morrow, I think—we will devote to recitation.'

William Henry's countenance fell. He had heard Mr. Reginald Talbot's recitations before. They were not *extempore, but they* had one fatal attribute in common with *extemporaneous* effusions—there was no knowing where

they would end. If he had been invited to recite his own poetry, that would have been a different thing.

'Nothing would be more agreeable to me, my dear fellow, but how am I to excuse my absence from chambers?'

'Then I'll come to your chambers instead of your coming to me; I shall thus have the opportunity of seeing how *your* muse has progressed; we will compare notes together. To be sure, it is not as if you had your room to yourself: there's that disagreeable fellow-clerk of yours, a most unappreciative and flippant person.'

'Yes, he would spoil everything,' put in William Henry eagerly. 'It is better we should be alone together, even for a less time, at the "Blue Boar."'

'Very good; then give me as long as you can to-morrow. I want your advice, for the fact is, the business on which I am come up to town is about the publication of my poems. The publisher and I cannot agree about terms, which seems strange, since what we both want is money down. Perhaps you wouldn't mind my selecting a few of your very best—you and I could rig out a twin volume together, like Beaumont and Fletcher.'

'Perhaps,' observed William Henry dubiously.

He had private and pressing reasons for conciliating Mr. Reginald Talbot, but to such a monstrous proposition as had just been made to him he felt he could never consent. It would be like yoking his Pegasus to a dray-horse. As regarded other matters, it was true that Talbot and he were old friends—or rather it would be more correct to say that they had for years of boyhood been thrown into one another's company; the bond of school friendship is, however, soon weakened under the influence of other conditions, as hothouse flowers fade and fail in the open air; and, moreover, when angered, Talbot, who piqued himself on his knowledge of human nature, had a habit of saying what he thought of his antagonist, which was not the less intolerable if it happened to be correct. Their tastes, it was true, were similar, but involved some rivalry, and each *perhaps was* secretly conscious that the other did not

admire his verses so much as he pretended to do. With the Irish Channel between them, they would doubtless have continued to get on capitally together, but, as intimates, the path of friendship had pitfalls. It must be added that Mr. Reginald Talbot's arrival in town had taken place at a most inconvenient season, and was, in a word, unwelcome to his former crony. That this was not perceived by Talbot was not so much owing to the other's tact as to his own conceit, which was stupendous; but fortunately it was not seen. Perhaps our young friend did not quite believe in the Irish gentleman's sympathy with him in respect to Margaret, and misdoubted his 'Spy-glass;' perhaps he thought him, if not too wise, too cunning by half. At all events, he greatly regretted that his brother bard had just now come to London, and especially about the remunerative production of his poems, which he had reason to believe would be a protracted operation.

The next afternoon, when he paid his promised visit to the 'Blue Boar,' a circumstance occurred which caused him increased annoyance.

'I say, my astute young friend,' were Talbot's first words, delivered in that half-morose, half-bantering way which was habitual to him when ready primed for a quarrel, 'where have you been to these last three hours?'

'To the Temple. Did I not tell you that I generally went there in the afternoon? As to the exact locality, you must perceive the impropriety of my mentioning it even to you.'

'Still you might speak the truth about other matters. Why did you not tell me that old Bingley had dismissed his second clerk?'

'What possible interest could the circumstance have for you?'

'Only that you allowed me to conclude that he was still there, in order that I should not come to New Inn.'

'Very good; then you know the reason.'

Mr. Reginald Talbot grew very red, and his stout

frame grew visibly stouter. William Henry, however, though more slightly built, was not his inferior (as he had more than once had the opportunity of discovering) either in courage or in the art of self-defence.

'After behaving in so false a manner to me, sir,' said Talbot, pointing to a very considerable heap of MSS. written in parallel lines, 'I shall not read you my poems.'

'Thank you; that is returning good for evil,' said William Henry coolly. 'Read them to yourself and not aloud, or you will set the cats a-caterwauling;' and with that he clapped his hat on and marched out of his friend's apartments.

It was not one of those quarrels described as the renewal of love; it was a deadly feud. A woman, even if she is not as fair as Venus, may forgive an imputation on her good looks; but a poet, conscious of an inferiority to Shakespeare, does not forgive a slight inflicted on his muse.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LOVE-LOCK.

WHETHER William Henry's short method with Mr. Reginald Talbot was to be satisfactory or not remains to be seen, but for the present it had all the effect intended. The inmate of the 'Blue Boar' confined himself to his own quarters, or, at all events, did not take advantage of the general invitation given to him by Mr. Samuel Erin to visit Norfolk Street. Nor did that gentleman make any inquiry into the cause of his absence. He had done his best to pleasure his son and encourage him in his discoveries, but was well content that 'the popinjay' kept away. With William Henry—and this was, perhaps, even a greater proof of the change in the old man than his more active kindnesses—he was very patient and unimportunate. He would cast one look of earnest inquiry on

the young fellow as he came home every evening, and, receiving a shake of the head by way of reply, would abstain from further questioning. Such was his admiration for the nameless inmate of the Temple that he respected his wish for silence, even as it were at second hand. This behaviour was most acceptable to its object, and the more so since the reticence Mr. Erin thus observed in his own case he imposed upon his visitors, who would have otherwise subjected William Henry to the question, *forte et dure*, half a dozen times a day. He had persuaded himself that if once the mysterious visitor should get to know that a fuss was being made about that note of hand, he would withdraw his favours from his protégé altogether.

One evening William Henry came home a little earlier than usual, and in return to his father's inquiring look returned a smile full of significance.

'I have found something, father,' he said, 'but you must be content, in this case, with the examination of it.'

'Then your friend has gone back from his word,' replied the old man; 'well, it was almost too much to expect that he should have kept to it.'

'Nay, you must not misjudge him, father, for the very restrictions he has placed upon me mean nothing but kindness. The treasure-trove is this time for Margaret.'

'Margaret! what does he know about Margaret? Well, at all events, it is in the family.'

This reflection alone would hardly have been sufficient to smooth away disappointment from the old man's brow, had it not also struck him that his niece had no great taste for old MSS., and that a new gown, with a fashionable breast-knot, or some Flanders lace, would probably be considered an equivalent for the original draft of Hamlet.

'Come, come, let us hear about it.'

'*But if* you please, sir, we must wait for my cousin, *my patron said*——'

'*Maggie, Maggie!*' exclaimed the old man, running

out into the little hall and calling up the stairs, 'come down this moment; here is a present for you.'

At the unwonted news Maggie ran downstairs, arranging the last touches of her costume upon the way, and arriving in the parlour in the most charming state of flush and fervour. Entranced with her beauty, and conscious of having made another step towards the accomplishment of his hopes, William Henry devoured her with his eyes. It was seldom, indeed, that he committed such an imprudence—in company—but if he had kissed her, it is probable, under the circumstances, Mr. Erin would have made no remark, or set it down to Shakespearean enthusiasm.

'Another MS., Maggie!' he cried triumphantly.

'Come, that is better than fifty presents,' answered Maggie, beaming. 'I forgive you for your trick upon me, uncle, with all my heart.'

'But what I have found is for *you*,' said William Henry firmly.

'Just so,' exclaimed Mr. Erin hurriedly, 'the MS. or something of equal worth, that you would like vastly better. Let us see; now let us see.'

William Henry took out of his pocket an ancient, timeworn piece of paper, carefully unfolded it, and produced from it a lock of brown straight hair.

'I thought you said it was a MS.,' exclaimed Mr. Erin, in a tone of extreme disappointment. 'Why, this is only hair, and if I may be allowed to say so, not a very good specimen even of that.'

'Nevertheless, sir, such as it is, it is Shakespeare's hair!'

'Shakespeare's hair!' echoed Mr. Erin, falling into rather than sitting down on the nearest chair; 'it is impossible—you are imposing on me.'

William Henry turned very white, and looked very grave and pained.

'Oh, uncle, how can you say such a thing!' cried Margaret plaintively: 'poor Willie!'

'*I did not* mean that, my lad, of course,' gasped Mr.

Erin; 'I scarcely know what I say. It seems too great a thing to be true. *His* hair!' He eyed it with speechless reverence, as it lay in his son's open palm; his trembling fingers hovered round it, like the wings of a bird round the nest of its little ones, but did not venture to touch it.

'Where was it found?' he murmured.

'Wrapped up in this paper, a letter to Anne Hathaway, which mentions the fact of his sending her the lock, and encloses some verses.'

'Is it possible?' exclaimed the old man, with intense excitement; 'oh, happy day! Read it, read it! I can see nothing clearly.'

The letter ran as follows:

'Dearesste Anna,—As thou haste alwaye founde mee toe my worde moste treue, so thou shalt see I have stryctlye kept mye promyse. I praye you perfume thys mye poore Locke withe thye balmye eyess, fore thenne, indeede, shalle Kynges themmeselves love and paye homage toe itte. I doe assure thee no rude hand hath knottedde itte, thye Willys alone hath done the worke. Adewe sweete love.

'Thyne everre,

'Wm. Shakespeare.'

'Most tender, true, and precious!' exclaimed the antiquary ecstatically; 'and now the verses?'

'There are but two, sir,' said the young man apologetically:—

'"Is therre in heavenne aught more rare
Thane thou sweete nymphe of Avon fayre,
Is therre onne earthe a manne more treue
Thanne Willy Shakespeare is toe you?"'

William Henry read very well, and with much pathos, and into the last line he put especial tenderness, which did not need the covert glance he shot at her to bring the colour into Margaret's cheek.

'"Though deathe with neverre faylinge blowe,
Doth manne and babe alyke bringe lowe;
Yet doth he take naught butte hys due
And strikes not Willy's heart still treue."'

'What simplicity, what fidelity!' murmured the antiquary; 'a flawless gem indeed! Whence did you unearth it?'

'I found it where I found the other deed, sir, amongst my patron's documents; I took it, of course, to him at once. He was greatly surprised and interested, and fully conscious of the value of the godsend; yet he never showed the least sign of regret at the gift he made me, of what he was pleased to call the jetsam and flotsam from his collection. "If I were a younger man," he said, "I think I should have grudged you that lock of hair. It is just the sort of present a young fellow should give to the girl he has a respect for. A thing that costs nothing, yet is exceedingly precious, and which speaks of love and fidelity. It is too good for any antiquary."'

'Your patron is mad, my lad,' said Mr. Erin, in a tone of cheerful conviction; 'he *must* be mad to talk like that; and, indeed, he would never give away these things at all if he were in his sober senses. The idea of bestowing such an inestimable relic upon a girl! Why, it should rather be preserved in some museum in the custody of trustees, to the delight of the whole nation for ever.'

'Nevertheless, sir, such was my patron's injunction. He asked me if I knew any pure and comely maiden, well brought up, and who would understand the value of such a thing. I had therefore, of course, no choice but to mention Margaret; whereupon he said that the lock of hair was to be hers.'

'I'll keep it for you, Maggie, in my iron press,' said Mr. Erin considerately. 'You shall look at it—in my presence—as often as you like; and then we shall both know that it is safe and sound.—As for the letter and verses, Samuel, it will be better to put them for the present, perhaps, in the same repository.'

'You may put them where you like, sir,' answered William Henry, smiling, as he always did when addressed by that unwonted name; 'they are yours.'

'*A good lad*, an excellent lad,' murmured the anti-

quary; 'now let us with all due reverence inspect these treasures. This is the very hair I should have looked for as having been the immortal bard's, just as the engraving by Droeshout depicts it in the folio edition. Brown, straight, and wiry, as Steevens terms it.'

'I should not call it wiry, uncle,' observed Margaret; 'though, to be sure, it has no curl nor gloss on it; it seems to me soft enough to have been a woman's hair.'

'It is, perhaps, a trifle silkier and more effeminate than the description would warrant,' returned the antiquary, 'but that is doubtless due to the mellowing effects of time. It may be so far looked upon as corroborative evidence. In that connection, by-the-bye, let me draw your particular attention to the braid with which the hair is fastened. This woven silk is not of to-day's workmanship. I recognise it as being of the same kind used in the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth for attaching the royal seal to patents: a most interesting circumstance, and one which, were there any doubt of the genuineness of the hair, might, like the impress of the quintin in the case of the Hemynnge deed, be reasonably adduced as an undesigned coincidence. Then to think that we have it under his own hand that Shakespeare's fingers have knotted it. Read his words once again, my son, before we put the priceless treasure by.'

'"I doe assure thee no rude hand hath knotteddeitte, thye Willys alone hath done the worke."'

'How tender, how touching!' exclaimed the antiquary. 'We seem to be in his very presence. What a privilege has this day been vouchsafed to us, my children!'

The two young people glanced at one another involuntarily as the old man addressed them by this title.

It is probable that Mr. Erin attached no particular meaning to it. It may have been only the expression of the measureless content he felt with both of them; with his son for what he had brought him, and with his niece for the readiness with which she had resigned what he had

brought to his own custody. But to their ears it had a deep significance.

As their looks met, that of William Henry was so full of tender triumph that Maggie's face became crimson, and she cast down her eyes. For the first time she began to believe in the possibility of the realisation of the young man's dream. Notwithstanding what had passed between them, she had hitherto felt more like a sister towards him than a lover; it was not that she feared to risk the wreck of her own happiness by trusting it to so slight a bark, but that, while matters were so uncertain, a natural and modest instinct prevented her from regarding him as he regarded her. There had been a sort of false dawn of love with her, but, now that her uncle seemed to give such solid ground for hope, the sun which had long lain in wait behind those clouds of doubt came out with all the splendour of the morn. Love arose within her.

As Mr. Erin reverently placed his treasures in the iron safe, William Henry stole his arm round Margaret's waist:—

'Is there on earthe a manne more treue
Than Willie Erin is to you?'

he whispered softly; and for the first time she did not reprove him.

CHAPTER XII.

A DELICATE TASK.

Great as had been Mr. Erin's joy when he first looked on Shakespeare's love-lock and love-letter, it by no means wore off—as our violent delights are apt to do—as time went on. What was wanting in the way of novelty was made up to him perhaps—for we may be sure Margaret did not insist upon her rights in the matter—by the sense of possession. For what was the position of the man who *had in his* cupboard some unique pieces of china, or even

in his coffers the biggest ruby or diamond in the world, as compared with his own? Only, as in the latter case, he grew not a little nervous for the safety of his unrivalled treasure. He was a *virtuoso* and antiquary himself, and therefore recognised the full extent of his danger. In his iron press he caused a little well to be sunk, in which the lock of hair was placed under glass, for the contemplation of the faithful, and none was ever permitted to behold it save in his presence. Even then he did not feel safe, but compelled himself to adopt a plan to ensure security which galled him to the quick. Just as in old times black-mail was wont to be given by the rich to leading and powerful robbers as an insurance on their goods, so Mr. Samuel Erin did not hesitate to offer to the more audacious and formidable of his learned brethren bribes, and those of the most precious kind imaginable. Though every thread taken from Shakespeare's lock gave him a pang infinitely keener than the drawing out of his own beard with pincers would have done, he actually distributed a few of these precious hairs among his friends, which they placed reverently in rings and lockets. We may be sure that Sir Frederick Eden had a genuine hair or two; but it was whispered by the envious (who were many) that upon applications becoming numerous, Mr. Erin's favours grew in proportion, which, as the lock did not diminish, could only arise from some other source of supply.

Among the recipients who entertained this doubt, or among those who received no such sacred relic at all, there were some who had the hardihood to assert that no human hair could have resisted the lapse of time since Shakespeare's days. They even produced a Mr. Collett, a hair merchant, who came to inspect the lock—from a distance of several feet, however—and who had the hardihood to express this opinion in the proprietor's presence. To describe the effect of anger in aged persons, especially when accompanied with personal violence, is painful to one who, like the present writer, has a respect for the dignity of human nature, so we will draw a veil over what

ensued, but it is certain that Mr. Collett left Norfolk Street on that occasion with much precipitation—taking the four steps that led to the front door at a bound: he also left his hat behind him, which was thrown after him into the street. It must be admitted that his objections were as absurd as they were impertinent, since it is well known that human hair has survived many centuries of burial; indeed, when the vault of Edward IV., who died in 1483, was opened at Windsor, the hair of the head was found flowing, and as strong as hair cut from the head of a living person. This Sir Frederick Eden privately assured Mr. Erin to be true, since he was not only present at the exhumation, but had been so fortunate, by means of a heavy bribe to the sexton, as to get some of the said hair for his private collection.

Partly from reasons that have been suggested, but chiefly from William Henry's remonstrance upon his patron's account—who he felt confident would lay an embargo upon all future treasure-troves, if he should find the report of what had happened to interfere with his own ease and privacy—Mr. Samuel Erin took little pains to circulate the news of his son's second discovery; but nevertheless it oozed out, and in spite of himself William Henry found himself to be in some respects a public character. Whoever called to see the manuscripts inquired also if the young gentleman was at home, to receive from his own lips the oft-told tale of their discovery. This was exceedingly irksome to him; he would much rather have been reading and talking to his fair cousin, and let his father have all the glory of exhibition and explanation to himself. But Maggie never grudged him to these inquirers; she was pleased to find he was so much sought after, and took a greater pride in it than even her uncle. William Henry went to New Inn, as usual, but it was well understood that the time he spent there was of little consequence as compared with his visits to the Temple. Mr. Erin ever thirsted for new discoveries, not only on their own account, but because, as

he justly observed, the greater the bulk of them, the more probable would their genuineness appear to those inclined to question it. The antiquary demands not only treasure but credit, and though Mr. Erin himself entertained no doubts, he would rather that other people had none; just as the gentleman who kept the thousand-pound note framed and glazed upon his mantelpiece, not content with knowing it was from the Bank of England, resented the imputation from his friends of its having been issued from the Bank of Elegance.

Moreover, Mr. Erin was secretly troubled at the continued absence of Frank Dennis. He could, as we have seen, on occasion, and even when there was no occasion, give him the rough side of his tongue, but in his heart he greatly respected him. The old man, thanks to himself, or rather to his temper, had few friends; the bond that united him to those he possessed was itself a source of rivalry and disagreement. But Dennis's father and himself had been as brothers, and after the former died, Mr. Erin had allowed the young man some familiarity, to which certainly none of his years had been admitted before or since.

He professed just now to be absent on business, but business had never detained him from Norfolk Street so long before. Mr. Erin reproached himself with having driven him away by his harsh behaviour, and even went so far as to confess as much to his niece.

'Of course it annoyed me, wench, to see Frank so obstinate in his incredulity; for that he was incredulous about that note of hand I am certain.'

'I can only say that he never breathed a word of doubt to me, uncle.'

'Nor to me, yet I know he harboured doubts,' was the confident reply. 'He stuck to them even after Sir Frederick found out the quintin on the seals.'

'Still, it's only a matter of opinion, uncle.'

'*Opinion! it's* what the believers in the Scarlet *Woman call* inveterate contumacy—they used to burn *people for it.*'

'Well, but you don't agree with *them*, you know,' smiled Margaret. 'You were always a stickler for the rights of private judgment.'

The antiquary shook his head and pursed his lips, the only reply possible to him under the circumstances; he could not say, 'But when I mean private judgment, I mean the judgment that coincides with my private views.'

'Perhaps I have been a little hard on him, Maggie, and that is what keeps him away. I wish he were back again.'

This confession from the mouth of such a man was pathetic. What it conveyed, as Margaret partly guessed, was, that in the crowd of flatterers and secret detractors by whom her uncle was surrounded he felt the loss of his honest, if somewhat too outspoken, friend. She felt remorse too, as well as compunction, for in her heart she suspected that she herself was the cause of Frank's absence.

He had doubtless noticed the changed relations between herself and William Henry, and withdrawn himself, but without a word of complaint, from her society. He recognised the right she had to choose for herself, nor did he grudge her the happiness she found in her choice, but he could not endure the contemplation of it. It was out of the question, of course, that she should reveal this to Mr. Erin; but she was too straightforward to corroborate a view of the matter which she knew to be incorrect.

'I don't think Frank is one, uncle, to take offence at anything you may have said to him about the Deed. He is too sensible—I mean,' she added, with the haste of one who withdraws his foot from a precipice, 'his nature is too generous to harbour offence.'

'You really think that, do you?' returned the old man in a tone of unmistakable relief. 'Well, in that case just drop him a line and let him know how the matter stands. You need not put it upon me at all, but say you miss his society here very much, as, of course, *you do.*'

Margaret was greatly embarrassed; the task thus proposed to her was almost impossible. She had never written to the young man before, and to do so now in her peculiar circumstances, and for the purpose of asking him to return to town, would be very painful to her, and might be misleading to him.

'I like Mr. Dennis very much, uncle,' she stammered, 'but——'

'Just so,' interrupted the antiquary; 'this scepticism of his, as you were about to say, is a serious drawback; still, if *I* can get over it, *you* can surely make allowance for him. Moreover, when he sees the lock of hair and the love-letter—and perhaps there may be other discoveries by the time he returns—he must be a very Thomas not to believe such proof. Now if it had been he instead of William Henry who had found these precious relics, all would have indeed been well.'

'I don't think we should grudge poor Willie his good fortune, sir,' returned Margaret reprovingly. She was quicker than ever now to take her cousin's part, and her uncle's tone of regret had touched her to the quick. It made it evident to her that his new-found regard for his adopted son was but skin-deep—or rather manuscript-deep. The pity for him that she had always felt had become a deeper and more tender sentiment, and given her more courage to defend him.

'Grudge him? Of course I do not grudge him,' returned the antiquary, fuming. 'I only meant that if Frank Dennis had William Henry's gifts he would be a perfect man; you can tell him *that* if you like.'

For a single instant Margaret saw herself telling Mr. Dennis 'that,' and felt the colour rise to her very forehead. Her uncle noticed that there was a hitch somewhere, and became naturally impatient at finding his wishes interfered with by the scruples of a 'slip of a girl.'

'Well, write what you will,' he continued, with irritation, 'only see that it brings him.'

Poor Margaret! She liked Frank Dennis as she had

said, very much; but, as she had only too good reason to believe, not so much as he wished her to do. What she had to say to him was: 'Come to me, but not for my sake.' It was a parallel to the nursery address to the ducks, 'Dilly, Dilly, come and be killed;' only he was not to be killed, but tortured. What were the use of compliments? It was like asking a young gentleman to be best man when he wants to be the bridegroom himself. She could thoroughly depend upon Willie to avoid all appearance of triumph, but there was no getting over the fact that he was Frank's successful rival; though he would never say like the boastful schoolboy to his less fortunate companion, 'Do you like cakes? Then see me eat them!' yet he had the cake, and it was a cake that could not be divided. However, there was no help for it, so she sat down to write her letter.

It was a very difficult and delicate task. She had learnt to call him Frank, but could she address him so on paper? 'Dear Mr. Dennis' was too formal, and 'My dear Mr. Dennis' was, under the circumstances, not to be thought of. She eventually wrote, 'Dear Frank' (how dreadfully familiar it looked! yet a fortnight ago it would have seemed natural enough), 'what delays the wheels of your chariot? If it is business I am sure you must have had time to build a cathedral. My uncle misses you very much'—this sounded unkind; it suggested that no one else regretted his absence, so she added—'as we all do.' Here with a little sigh she underlined *all*, so as to make it appear that she regretted him only as William Henry did, no more and no less. 'I hope, for my uncle's sake, you will come back less of an infidel in Shakespearean affairs. The lock of hair, of the discovery of which you have doubtless heard, has, by-the-bye, thanks to the chivalry of "The Templar," been given to me, so you will understand that any aspersion cast upon its genuineness is a personal matter. The weather is wet —though it should make no difference to an architect,

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since he can roof himself anywhere—so there is no excuse for your lingering in the country for pleasure's sake.'

Had she dared to say so, she might have hinted very prettily that with him the sunshine would return to Norfolk Street; but she was no longer fancy free. Even as it was, sisterly as she had endeavoured to make the tone of her letter, she feared she might have given him some involuntary encouragement. It was terrible to her to feel so confident as she did that on the receipt of it Frank Dennis would start for London.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PROFESSION OF FAITH.

Two days after Margaret's letter was despatched there was great news from the Temple. Not even on the first day, when William Henry had won Mr. Erin's heart by Shakespeare's note of hand, had the young man's face been so full of promise as when he came in that evening. On the former occasion, anxiety and doubt had mingled with its expectancy, but now it was flushed with triumph. The difference of manner with which he produced his new discovery was also noticeable. It was not only that he felt as sure of the assent of his audience (who were, indeed, but his uncle and Margaret) as of his own, but he displayed a certain self-consciousness of his own position. He was no longer an unknown lad, seeking for the favour of one who should have been his natural protector, for he had already won it. It was true he was still dependent upon him for the means of livelihood, and for something that he prized as highly as existence itself; but Mr. Erin had in some sort, on the other hand, become dependent on him. His reputation as a Shakespearean collector and critic, which was very dear to him, had been immensely increased by his son's discoveries. The newspapers and

magazines were full of his good fortune; and even those which disputed the genuineness of his newly acquired possessions made them the subject of continual comment, and added fuel to his notoriety. If such a metaphor can be used without offence in the case of a gentleman of years and learning, Mr. Samuel Erin gazed at William Henry with much the same air of expectation as a very sagacious old dog regards his young master, whom he suspects of having some toothsome morsel in his pocket; he has too much respect for his own dignity to 'beg' for it, by sitting up on his hind legs, or barking, but he moves his tail from side to side, and his mouth waters.

The young gentleman did not, at first, even produce his prize, but sat down at table with a cheerful nod, that seemed to say, 'I have found it at last, and by the sacred bones that rest by Avon's stream, it is worth the finding.'

'Well, Willie,' exclaimed Margaret, impatiently, 'what is it?'

The young man gravely produced two half-sheets of paper.

At the sight of it—for he knew that it was not the new Bath Post—the antiquary's eyes glistened.

'Mr. Erin——' began William Henry.

'Why not call me "father," Samuel?' put in the old man gently; if it was the sense of favours to come that moved him, it was at least a deep and genuine sense of them. Margaret's fair face glowed with pleasure.

'I have often heard you say, father, that you wished above all things to discover what were, in reality, Shakespeare's religious convictions.'

The antiquary nodded assent, but said nothing; the intensity of expectation, indeed, precluded speech; the perspiration came out upon his forehead.

'It distressed you, I know, to believe it possible—as, indeed, the language used by the Ghost in "*Hamlet*' would seem to imply, that he was of the Catholic persuasion. In the profession of faith found at Stratford——'

'Spurious,' put in Mr. Erin mechanically; 'that fool, Malone, believed in it, nobody else.'

This was not quite in accordance with fact; for many months the whole Shakespearean world had admitted its authenticity.

'If it had been true, however, it would have offended your sense of the fitness of things.'

'No doubt; still we must take things as they really were.'

Even if it should turn out that Shakespeare was not so good a Protestant as he ought to be, the value of a genuine manuscript was not to be depreciated.

'Well, I have been this day so fortunate as to discover what will put all doubts at rest upon this point. Shakespeare was a Protestant.'

'Thank Heaven!' murmured Mr. Erin piously. 'If you have done this, my son, you have advanced the claims of true religion, and quickened the steps of civilisation throughout the world.'

Margaret's eyes opened very wide (as well they might), but they only beheld William Henry. She had been wont to rally him upon his vanity, and especially upon the hopes he had built upon his poetical gifts. Yet how much greater a mark was he making in the world than his most sanguine aspirations had imagined! And how quiet and unassuming he looked! The modest way in which he habitually bore his honours pleased her even more than the honours themselves.

'After all, Maggie,' he would say, after receiving the congratulations of the dilettanti, 'it is nothing but luck.'

As he straightened out the half-sheets of paper on the table, where their homely supper stood untouched and unnoticed, he only permitted himself a smile of gratification.

'It is too long,' he said, 'to read aloud, and the old spelling is difficult.'

His uncle drew his chair close to him, on one side, and Margaret did the like on the other, so that both could

read for themselves. Their looks were full of eagerness; the one was thinking of Shakespeare and Samuel Erin, the other of William Henry, and—*longo intervallo*—of William Shakespeare.

The MS., which was headed 'William Shakespeare's Profession of Faith,' ran as follows:—

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S PROFESSION OF FAITH.

I beynge nowe offe sounde Mynde doe hope thatte thys mye wyshe wille, att mye deathe, bee acceded toe, as I nowe lyve in Londonne, and as mye soule maye perchance, soone quittee thys poor bodye, itte is mye desire thatte inne suche case I maye bee carryed toe mye native place, ande thatte mye Bodye bee there quietlye interred wythe as little pompe as canne bee, and I do nowe, inne these mye seryouse moments, make thys mye professione of faythe, and which I doe moste solemnlye believe. I doe fyrste looke toe oune lovynge and Greate God and toe his glorious sonne Jesus. I doe alsoe beleyve thatte thys mye weake and frayle Bodye wille returne to duste, butte for mye soule lette God judge thatte as toe himselfe shalle seeme meete. O omnipotente and greate God I am fulle offe synne, I doe notte thinke myeselfe worthye offe thye grace and yette wille I hope, forre evene thee poore prysonerre whenne bounde with gallying irons evene he wille hope for Pittye and whenne the teares of sweete repentance bathe hys wretched pillowe he then looks and hopes for pardonne thenne rouse mye soule and lette hope, thatte sweete cherysher offe all, afforde thee comforte also. O Manne whatte arte thou whye consideres thou thyselfe thus gratelye, where are thye great, thye boasted attrybutes; buryed, loste forre everre in colde Death. O Manne whye attemptest thou toe searche the greatnesse off the Almyghtye thou doste butte loose thye laboure. More thou attempteste, more arte thou loste, tille thye poore weake thoughtes arre elevated toe theyre summite and thenne as snowe from the leffee tree droppe and dystylle themselves tille theye are noe more. O God, manne as I am frayle bye nature, fulle offe synne, yette great God receyve me toe thye bosomme where alle is sweete contente and happyness alle is blyss where dyscontente isse neverre hearde, butte where oune Bonde offe freyndeshippe unytes alle Menne forgive O Lorde alle our synnes, ande withe thye greate goodnesse take usse alle toe thye Breaste; O cheryshe usse like the sweete chickenne thatte under the coverte offe herre spreadynge wings Rcceyves herre lyttle Broode and hoverynge overre themme keepes themme harmlesse and in safetye.

Wm. Shakespeare.

Margaret finished the perusal of the MS. before her uncle; her quicker and more youthful eye would probably have done so in any case, but his reverence for the matter forbade rapid reading; she waited respectfully, but also

with some little apprehension, for the expression of his opinion.

'This *is* a godsend!' he exclaimed at last, with a sigh that had almost as much relief as satisfaction in it. 'There can be no longer any doubt about Shakespeare's creed. Is it not beautiful and full of humility, my child?'

'Yes, uncle.' She knew that the least fault-finding would be resented, yet she could not shut out from her tone a certain feeling of disappointment. 'It is hardly, however, so simple as I should have expected.'

'Not simple!' exclaimed the antiquary in amazement; 'I call it the most natural effusion of a sincere piety that it is possible to imagine. The diction is solemn and dignified as the subject demands. There are, indeed, some minute particularities of phraseology, and the old spelling to one unaccustomed to it may, as William Henry has observed, be a little difficult; but of all the accusations you could bring against it, that of a want of simplicity, my dear Maggie, is certainly the most frivolous and vexatious.'

'I know I am frivolous,' replied Margaret, with a sly look at her smiling cousin, 'but certainly did not intend to be vexatious, uncle.'

'Nay, nay, I was only quoting a legal phrase,' said Mr. Erin; he had gently drawn the two precious MSS. to himself, and placed an elbow on each of them, in sign of having taken possession. 'In a case of this kind I need not say that anything in the way of criticism, as to ideas or style, would be out of place, and indeed blasphemous; but no one can blame you for seeking in a proper spirit for enlightenment on this or that point.'

Margaret looked up at William Henry, and with a half-roguish and wholly charming smile inquired, 'May I?'

'My dear Maggie,' returned the young man, laughing outright, 'why, of course you may. Even if you detected the immortal bard in an error, it would be no business of mine to defend him.'

'I should think not, indeed,' muttered Mr. Erin.

'What I was thinking,' said Margaret, 'was that if you, Willie, or Mr. Talbot (who informed us the other night, you know, that he was a poet) had written those lines about spreading her wings over her little brood, it would have been considered plagiarism.'

'What then?' inquired Mr. Erin contemptuously. 'It is the peculiar province of a genius such as Shakespeare's to make everything his own. He improves it by addition.'

'The idea in question, however, is taken from the New Testament,' observed Maggie.

To most people this remark, which was delivered with a demureness that did the young lady infinite credit, would under the circumstances have been rather embarrassing. It did not embarrass Mr. Samuel Erin in the least.

'What piety it shows! what knowledge of the Holy Scriptures!' he ejaculated admiringly. 'How appropriate, too, when we take the subject into consideration—a confession of faith!'

'True. I am not quite sure, however, whether the substitution of a chicken for a hen is an improvement.'

'Now there I entirely differ from you,' exclaimed Mr. Erin; 'just mark the words "O cheryshe usse like the sweete chickenne thatte under the coverte offe herre spreadynge wings receyves herre lyttle Broode and hoverynge over themme keepes themme harmlesse and in safetye." What tenderness there is in that "sweete chickenne"! Whereas a hen—a hen is tough. We must understand the expression of course as a general term for the female species of the fowl. None, to my mind, but the most determined and incorrigible caviller can have one word to say against it. I have settled that matter, I think, my dear, to your satisfaction; and do not suppose that what you say has annoyed me. If anything else strikes you, pray mention it. Objections from any source —provided only that they are *reasonable*'—a word he uttered very significantly—'will always have my best attention; I welcome them.'

'*Indeed*, uncle, I am not so audacious as to propound

objections. There was one thing, however, that seemed to me a little incomprehensible.'

'Possibly, my dear,' he said, with a smile of contemptuous good-nature, which seemed to add, 'I am not so rude as to say "probably."'

He took his elbows off the MS., though he still hovered above it (like the chicken) while she ran her dainty finger over it, taking care, however, not to touch the paper.

'Ah! here it is: "As snowe from the leffee tree." Now, considering that snow falls in winter when the trees are bare, don't you think the word should have been "leafless"?'

'An ordinary person would no doubt have written "leafless,"' admitted Mr. Erin—an ingenious observation enough, since, in the first place, it suggested that an extraordinary genius could have done nothing of the kind; and secondly, it demanded no rejoinder; it gave the antiquary time to cast about him for some line of defence. He produced his microscope and examined the word with great intentness, but it was 'leffee' and not 'leafless' beyond all doubt. 'It is probable,' he presently observed, 'that Shakespeare's minute attention to nature may have caused him, when writing these most interesting words, to have a particular tree in his mind; when, indeed, we consider the topic on which he was writing—death—what is more likely than that his thoughts should have reverted to some churchyard yew? Now the yew, my child, is an evergreen.'

Here Frank Dennis's well-known voice was heard in the little hall without. He must have started for London, therefore, on the instant that he received Margaret's letter. Her heart had foreboded that it would be so, notwithstanding the pains she had taken to make it appear otherwise; she knew that it was her wish that had summoned him, and that he had been sent for, as it were, under false pretences. Much as she esteemed him, she would have preferred the appearance of anyone else, however indifferent, such as Mr. Reginald Talbot.

Strange to say, Mr. Samuel Erin, though it was at his own express desire that Frank Dennis had been invited, was just at that moment of the same way of thinking as his niece. If that little difficulty about the epithet 'leffee' had not occurred, all would have been well. This new discovery of the Confession, had it been flawless, must needs have converted the most confirmed of sceptics, and, in his crowning triumph, he would have forgiven the young fellow all his former doubts; but though to the eye of faith this little flaw was of no consequence, it would certainly give occasion not only for the ungodly to blaspheme —for that they would do in any case—but to the waverer to cling to his doubts. If, on the spur of the moment, Mr. Erin could have explained the matter to his own satisfaction, he would have felt no qualms, but he was secretly conscious that that theory of the evergreen tree would not hold water. It might satisfy a modest inquirer like Margaret, but a hard-headed, unimaginative fellow like Frank Dennis would not be so easily convinced.

As for William Henry, although Frank and he were by no means ill friends, it was not likely that he should have been pleased to see this visitor, whose presence must needs interrupt the *tête-à-tête* with which he now indulged himself every evening with Margaret; and, though he was no longer jealous of his former rival, it was certain that he would much have preferred his room to his company.

The welcome that was given by all three to the newcomer was, however, cordial enough. 'You are come, Dennis,' cried Mr. Erin, taking the bull by the horns, 'in the very nick of time. William Henry has to-day found a treasure, beside which his previous discoveries sink into insignificance; "A Profession of Faith," by Shakespeare, written from end to end in his own hand.'

'That must indeed be interesting,' said Frank. His tone, however, was without excitement, and mechanical. His countenance, which had been full of friendship (though when turned to Margaret it had had, she thought, an expression of gentle melancholy), fell as he uttered the words;

a gravity, little short of disapproval, seemed to take possession of it.

'Hang the fellow!' murmured Mr. Erin to himself, 'he's beginning to pick holes already.' 'It is the most marvellous and conclusive evidence,' he went on aloud, 'of Shakespeare's adherence to the Protestant faith that heart can desire; but there's a word here that we are in doubt about. Just read the MS. and see if anything strikes you as anomalous.'

Frank sat down to his task. The expression of the faces of the other three would have required the art of Hogarth himself to depict them. That of Margaret's was full of sorrow, pain for herself, and distress for Frank, and annoyance upon her uncle's account. How she regretted having made that stupid objection, though she had done it with a good motive, since she foresaw that it would presently be made by much less friendly critics! Why could she not have been content to let matters take their own course, as Willie always was?

On *his* brow, on the other hand, there sat a complete serenity. From the very first his attitude with respect to his own discoveries had been one of philosophic indifference. Nothing ever roused him from it, not even when the scepticism of others took the most offensive form. He had not, he said, 'the learning requisite for the defence of "the faith" that was in him;' and, moreover, it did not concern him to defend it. He was merely an instrument; the matter in question was in the hands of others.

This was of course by no means the view which Mr. Erin took. He had not only the confidence but the zeal of the convert. If he would not himself have gone to the stake in defence of the genuineness of his new-found treasure, he would very cheerfully have sent thither all who disputed it. He was regarding his friend Dennis now, as he plodded through the Profession, with anything but amicable looks, but when he marked his eye pass over that weak point in its armour with which we are acquainted, without stoppage, his brow cleared a little, and he gave a sigh of relief.

'Well,' he inquired gently, 'what say you? Have you found the error, or does it seem to you all straight sailing?'

'I had really rather not express an opinion,' said Dennis quietly. 'But if you press me, I must needs confess that the whole composition strikes me as rather rhapsodical.'

'Does it? Then I on my part must needs confess,' returned the antiquary, with laborious politeness, 'that I have the misfortune to disagree with you.'

To this observation the young man answered not a word; his face looked very grave and thoughtful, like that of a man who is in a doubt about some important course of conduct, rather than of a mere literary inquiry; nevertheless his words, when they did come, seemed to concern themselves with the latter topic only.

'I doubt,' he said, 'whether the word "accede"'—here he pointed to the phrase 'after my deathe be acceded to'—'was in use in Shakespeare's time.'

'And what if it was not?' broke in the antiquary impatiently. 'How many words in old times are found in the most correct writers which it would be vain to hunt for in any dictionary! words which, though destitute of authority or precedent, are still justified by analogy and by the principles of the language. And who, I should like to know, used new words with such licence as Shakespeare himself? As to the matter of fact which you dispute, however, that can be settled at once.' The antiquary stepped to his bookcase and took down a volume. 'This is Florio's dictionary, published in 1611. See here,' he added triumphantly, '"Accedere, to accede, or assent to." If Florio mentions it, I suppose Shakespeare may have used it. Your objection, young sir, is not worthy of the name.'

Dennis hung his head; he looked like one who has suffered not only defeat but humiliation. The criticism offered on the spur of the moment had been, in reality, advanced by way of protest against the whole document, and now that it had failed he was very unwilling to offer anything further in the way of disparagement.

He had his reasons for absolutely declining to fall in *with Mr.* Erin's views in the matter; but it would hav

given him great distress to quarrel with him. Unhappily, an antiquary the genuineness of whose curios has been disputed, is not often a chivalric antagonist. It is his habit, like the wild Indian and the wilder Irishman, to dance upon his prostrate foe.

'The obstinacy of the commentator,' resumed Mr. Erin, 'is proverbial, and is on some accounts to be excused; but the strictures suggested by ignorance and malignity are mere carping.'

'But it was yourself, sir,' pleaded Dennis, 'who invited criticism: I did not volunteer it.'

'Criticism, yes; but not carping. Now there *is* a word here,' continued Mr. Erin, not sorry to be beforehand with his adversary in pointing out the blot. 'Here is the word "leffee" where one would have expected "leafless." Now we should be really obliged to you if your natural sagacity, which is considerable, could explain the reason of the substitution. I have already given expression to a theory of my own upon the subject, but we shall be glad of any new suggestion. Why is it "leffee" instead of "leafless"?'

'I should think it was simply because the writer made a mistake,' observed Dennis quietly.

Everybody, the speaker included, expected an outburst. That Shakespeare could have made a mistake was an assertion which they all felt would to Mr. Erin's ear sound little less than blasphemous. To their extreme astonishment he nodded adhesion.

'Now that is really very remarkable, Dennis,' he exclaimed; 'a new idea, and at the same time one with much probability in it. He was writing *currente calamo* —there is scarcely a break in the composition, you observe, from first to last—and it is quite likely that he made this clerical error. What is extremely satisfactory is, that your theory—supposing it to be the correct one, as I think it is—puts the genuineness of the document beyond all question, for if a forger had written it, it is obvious that he would have been very careful to make no such departure from verisimilitude!'

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EXAMINERS.

Notwithstanding the powerful motives in connection with its munificent but unknown donor that impelled Mr. Samuel Erin to keep 'the Profession of Faith' a secret confined to his antiquarian friends, the thing was obviously impossible. It would have been almost as difficult, had the Tables of the Law been verily discovered upon Mount Sinai, to restrict the news to a few members of the religious public. The discovery, and the discoverer, William Henry Erin, became 'the Talk of the Town.' It seemed to Margaret impossible that the meritorious though fortunate young fellow could ever become more famous; but the possibilities of greatness are infinite; his foot, as it turned out, was only on the first rung of the ladder. The modest house in Norfolk Street became a sort of metropolitan Stratford-on-Avon; it was absolutely besieged by the antiquarian and learned world. Mr. Malone the commentator, indeed (who had not been invited), publicly announced his intention of not examining the MSS., 'lest his visit should give a countenance to them, which, from the secrecy that was observed relative to their discovery, they were not entitled to.' Mr. Steevens took the same course, as did also Dr. Farmer, Lord Orford, and the Bishops of Durham and Salisbury. The air was thick with their pamphlets and loud with their denunciations. But there were more fish than these in the Shakespearean seas, and quite as big ones, who were of a different opinion. Some of them came to scoff, but remained to admire and believe; others, calm and critical, examined and were convinced; others again, arriving in a reverent spirit, were filled with satisfaction and affected even to tears.

Under these circumstances, his own good faith being attacked, as well as these precious treasures maliciously denounced, Mr. Samuel Erin took a bold course. On a table in his sanctuary, side by side with the new discovery, was placed another 'profession of faith' in the validity of the MS. in question, which visitors were invited to sign. They were not, of course, compelled to do it; but, having expressed their belief in the genuineness of the document, it seemed not unreasonable that they should commit it to paper. In some cases there were rather humorous scenes. Antiquaries as a rule are not very eager to permanently endorse with their authority the treasures which are not in their own possession; they have been known even to express a cheerful belief in that or this, and afterwards, when unpleasant evidence turns up, to deny that they ever did believe in it; and Mr. Erin, who knew Latin, was an admirer of the ancient line, 'litera scripta manet,' which literally translated means, 'One can't well wriggle out of one's own handwriting.' As pilgrims did not pay for the privilege of admission to view these sacred relics, they were naturally inclined to be civil to their custodians, and, when sufficiently convinced of the genuineness of what they saw, to express themselves with much effusion and enthusiasm. As the paper in question was worded very modestly, but with extreme distinctness, there was no alternative for the impulsive person but to sign it.

'Delighted to have seen you,' Mr. Erin would say, as he pressed the hand of his departing guest; 'your unsought-for and enthusiastic testimony has been most gratifying to me.'

'Don't mention it, my dear sir, it is I who have been delighted. It has been a privilege indeed to have set eyes upon so valuable and absolutely authentic a document.'

'Then, just as a matter of form, be so good as to add your name to this already lengthy roll of Shakespearean critics; it will be the very keystone of the edifice of our faith.'

The faces of some of these enthusiasts, at this modest and reasonable request, would fall from zenith to nadir. They could not eat their own words, but they looked as if they would like to have eaten Mr. Samuel Erin.

William Henry, who had a strong sense of humour, was sometimes compelled to rush from the room, and hide his face, bedewed with tears of laughter, upon Margaret's shoulder.

These paroxysms used rather to distress her. 'Oh, Willie, Willie, how can you be so frivolous,' she would say, 'on a matter too that is so fraught with good or evil to both of us?'

'Oh, but if you could only *see* them, my darling,' he would reply, 'so civil, so beaming with courtesy and enthusiasm, and then all of a sudden—like a sportsman in a small way, who, boastful of his prowess, finds himself face to face with a wild boar—alarmed, astounded, and without the least hope of escape, you would laugh too. Then, when they *won't* sign, it is almost even better fun. Porson was here this morning; the great Dr. Porson, who knows as much Greek as Troilus did, and certainly can write it better. He drank half a bottle of brandy, a pint of usquebaugh, and all the miscellaneous contents of your uncle's spirit case, and, though he had said but little, was taking his leave in what seemed a state of complete good humour and satisfaction, when Mr. Erin requested the honour of his signature. Then he drew himself up as stiff as a pointer at a partridge.

'"I thank you, sir," he said, "but I never subscribe to anything, much less to a profession of faith." The disbelieving old heathen! I really thought your uncle would have kicked him into the street.'

'Oh, but I am so sorry about Dr. Porson.'

'Why, my darling? He was not really kicked, you know. Don't be sorry for Porson; be sorry for me. If I didn't find some amusement in these people, I believe I should go mad. You have no idea what I suffer from them, their examinations and their cross-examinations—

for when they are sceptical they *are* cross-examinations—their pomposity and pretence, are well-nigh intolerable. I don't know whether their patronage or their contempt is the more offensive.'

It was quite true that these investigations were not always a laughing matter to William Henry. On one occasion there was a regular committee of inquiry, composed of what might well be called bigwigs, folks of the highest reputation in matters of erudition, and most of them in full-bottomed perukes. The Rev. Mr. Warton, the commentator, was one of them, solemn as Porson had been, and much more sober; Dr. Parr, the divine and scholar, pompous yet affable, in ecclesiastical apparel, with shovel hat and apron; Pye, the poet laureate, combining the air of a man of letters with the importance belonging to a Government official; and half a dozen other grave and reverend signors. The room was specially arranged for their reception. Mr. Samuel Erin sat at the head of the table in the Shakespearean chair that he had purchased at Anne Hathaway's cottage. The Profession of Faith was spread before the learned epicures as though it was something to eat. Their eyes devoured it. William Henry had a chair to himself a little removed, ready to answer all inquiries. It was by far the most serious examination to which he had been subjected, but he acquitted himself very well. He had nothing, he said, to tell them but the simple truth. As to the genuineness of the document in question, he knew nothing, and had not even an opinion to offer on the subject.

These visitors were not Mr. Erin's personal friends; they did not fall into raptures, or affect to do so; they were by no means so courteous as the ordinary folks who came from curiosity; they had been invited for the special purpose of having their minds satisfied, or of coming to an adverse conclusion. It was like the Star Chamber, and they did not (as it seemed to William Henry) spare the thumbscrew or the boot. After an hour or two of this gentle pressure, Mr. Warton observed,

'Your testimony, young man, so far as it goes, is satisfactory to us, while your behaviour does you great credit.'

'Yes,' assented Dr. Parr, 'I think, Mr. Erin, you have a son of whom you may be justly proud. I heard you address him as Samuel; it is a gratifying coincidence to me that it is also my baptismal name.' Mr. Erin felt that it would be discourteous as well as embarrassing to undeceive him.

Then Mr. Pye was asked to read the Profession of Faith (which had by this time been fully investigated and discussed) aloud, which he did in a solemn and sonorous voice, with the company reverently upstanding as during Divine service. Then, amid a profound silence, Dr. Parr delivered himself as follows:—

'Sir, we have very fine passages in our Church Services, and our Litany abounds in beauties; but here, sir, is a man who has distanced us all.'

Most of the learned company bowed assent, and two, who were Nonconformists, murmured 'Hear, hear.' The tears trickled down Mr. Erin's cheeks; it was the proudest moment, so far, in the old man's life.

Later on in the day another gratifying circumstance took place. A visitor called who either had not received his invitation in time, or, what was more probable, not wishing his personal importance to suffer by comparison with that of others, had preferred to come alone. His face was fat and puffy, and exhibited an unparalleled self-sufficiency. He had a sharp nose, a double chin, and eye-brows superciliously elevated; he carried a gold-headed cane in his hands, clasped behind him, and spoke in a thick, slow voice. Mr. Erin received him with great respect, and submitted his literary treasure for examination with an unwonted humility. The investigation was a prolonged and apparently an exhausting one, for the visitor called three times (as though he had been in a public-house) for hot whisky and water! As Dr. Porson had drunk all there was in the case, Margaret herself, who *kept the key of* the cellar, took him in a fresh bottle,

and curiosity compelled her to remain. Her presence seemed somewhat to distract the attention of the guest from the precious manuscript.

'No doubt authentic,' he murmured, 'and devilish pretty; antiquity is stamped upon it.'

'And the right sort of antiquity,' suggested Mr. Erin. 'It has the stamp of the time.'

'Just so. I should think twenty years of age, at most.'

'Sir!' ejaculated his host.

'I mean the usquebaugh,' explained the visitor. 'Twenty years in bottle at least—did I say at most? and plump.'

Here Margaret was about to beat a retreat, when the gentleman rose. 'One moment, young lady,' he said; 'you do not know who I am. It will be something to tell your children's children that James Boswell, of Auchinleck, Esq.' (here he suited the action to the word), 'chucked you under the chin.'

William Henry felt greatly inclined to resent this liberty, but Mr. Erin only smiled approval.

'Another glass,' said Mr. Boswell, and proceeded with his investigations.

Presently, without a word of warning, he threw himself on his knees and pressed his lips to the MS.

'I kiss these invaluable relics of our bard,' he said, 'and thank Heaven that I have lived to see them. Would that my late revered friend, the great Lexi—the great Lexicog——' Emotion of various kinds prevented his completion of the sentence, and Mr. Erin led him with a gentle violence to the table on which lay the list of signatures; to which he added his name, though, it must be confessed, in a handwriting that was rather illegible.

CHAPTER XV.

AT VAUXHALL.

The members of the little household in Norfolk Street were now in great content. That word, indeed, scarcely describes the state of mind of the head of the house, who was literally transported with joy. It was difficult to identify the jubilant and triumphant old fellow with the grudging, smileless, and, to say truth, somewhat morose individual he had been a few months before. His regard for William Henry began to be quite troublesome, for, though he had not the least objection to Margaret and his son being alone together, he would often interrupt their little interviews from excess of solicitude upon his account. That somewhat flippant young gentleman used to compare his parent on these occasions to the 'sweete chickenne' of the Shakespearean profession, which was always 'hoverrynge over herre broode;' and, indeed, this affectionate anxiety was partly due to a certain apprehension the old gentleman experienced when the goose that laid the golden eggs for him was out of his sight. At present, however, as Margaret reminded her cousin, there were not enough of them—though so far as they went they had a very material value—to become nest eggs; they could not be considered as savings or capital to any appreciable extent. They were not, indeed, theirs at all, having been made over to Mr. Erin; but for the object the young people had in view that was all one as though they had remained their own. If a play of Shakespeare's, or even part of a play, should chance to turn up among those treasures of the Temple, that would indeed be a fortune to them, or at all events would procure the antiquary's consent to everything, and ensure his favour in perpetuity.

These ideas occurred to Margaret only in the vaguest

way, nor even in William Henry's mind did they take any well-defined shape. His nature, to do him justice, was by no means mercenary, and if he could only have called Margaret his own, he would have been content. As to being able to maintain her, he had always had a good opinion of his own talents; and though the praise with which he was now overwhelmed from so many quarters had, of course, no reference to them, it helped to increase his self-confidence.

In this comparative prosperity, and being of a disposition that was by no means inclined to triumph over an unsuccessful rival, it somewhat distressed him to find Frank Dennis standing somewhat aloof. He visited the house, indeed, but not so frequently as had been his wont, and, as regarded William Henry at least, not upon the same terms. He had always been friendly to the younger man under circumstances when it would have been excusable if he had been otherwise, but now he avoided him; not in any marked manner, but certainly with intention. If he had avoided Margaret also, the explanation would have been easy, but it was not so. He was not, indeed, on the same terms with that young lady as he had been; he did not, as of old, seek her society; his face did not brighten up as it was wont to do when she addressed him; but he treated her with a respect which, if it was not tender, was full of gentleness: whereas to William Henry he was even cold.

It was a significant proof of the transformation that had taken place in Mr. Erin that he not only noticed this, but in a manner apologised for it to William Henry.

'I am sorry to see that Dennis and you, my lad, don't seem to get on together so well as you used to do. But you must not mind his being a little jealous.'

At this the young man's face flushed, for 'jealousy' had just then with him but one meaning: he thought that his father was about to talk with him about Margaret, but his niece was not in the old man's thoughts at all.

'It is not everyone,' he went on, 'who can bear to see

the good fortune of his friends with equanimity; especially when it takes the form of such a stroke of luck as in your case. What Dennis says to himself is, "Why should not I have discovered these MSS. instead of William Henry?" And not having done so, he is a little bit envious of you, and is inclined to decry them. It is a pity, of course, but he can do you no more harm by it than he can harm Shakespeare by discrediting the work of his hand.'

But the young man was sorry nevertheless, and Margaret was still more grieved. Since Dennis had tacitly consented to her changed relations with her cousin, or at all events had made no opposition to them, she thought he might have forgiven him as he had forgiven her. It was a subject on which she could not speak to him, but occasionally there was something, or to her sensitive eye and ear seemed to be something, in his tone and manner, not resentful, but as though he pitied her for her choice, which annoyed her exceedingly.

This feeling was in no way reciprocated; it was impossible for Margaret to ruffle Frank Dennis, but he rarely came to Norfolk Street now, unless by special invitation. It had been proposed by Mr. Erin that they should all four go to Vauxhall together upon a certain evening—a very unusual dissipation, for except the theatre, of which when Shakespeare was acted (which in those days was very frequently) he was a pretty constant patron, the antiquary had no love for places of amusement—but Frank Dennis had declined to accompany them. He professed to have a previous engagement, which, as he went out very little, seemed improbable; indeed, it was understood by the others that he did not wish to go. This was a cause of sincere regret to them, not excluding William Henry, for if Dennis had come he would have paired off with Mr. Erin and left Margaret to himself. The expedition, however, was looked forward to with pleasure by both the young people even as it was: it had the charm of novelty for them, for William Henry was almost as great a stranger to what had now begun to be

called 'life' in London as his cousin. The little trip to the place by water was itself delightful, while the Gardens, with the coloured lamps and music and gaily dressed company, seemed to them like a dream of Paradise.

Mr. Samuel Erin was not indeed a very good cicerone to such a spot, for folks of their age; though he would have been invaluable to some distinguished foreigner with a thirst for information. He reminded them (or rather informed them, for they knew very little about it) how for more than a century the place had been the resort of all the wit and rank and gallantry of the town; how Addison had taken Sir Roger de Coverley there, and Goldsmith the Chinese philosopher, and Swift had gone in person to hear the nightingale; and how much more attractive it was than its rival Ranelagh, of which, nevertheless, as Walpole humorously writes, Lord Chesterfield was so fond that he ordered all his letters to be directed thither. It was with difficulty the old gentleman was persuaded not to take them away from the radiant scene to a neighbouring street to see the lodgings where the poet Philips had breathed his last; and, by way of reprisal for their preference for such gauds and tinsel, he quoted to them (after Dr. Johnson) Xerxes' remark about his army, that it was sad to think that of all that brilliant crowd not one would be alive a hundred years hence. The Scriptures themselves admit that there is a time to laugh and a time to play, and these literary reminiscences, and much more these didactic reflections, were felt by the young people to be a good deal out of place. If Mr. Erin could have been induced to visit the lodgings of Mr. Philips by himself, or to meditate on the Future alone, and in the Maze, then indeed they would have applauded him; but as it was, his company was a trifle triste.

They were presently relieved from it, however, in a wholly unexpected manner. They had explored the walks, promenaded the 'area,' and listened to the band to their hearts' content, and had just sat down in one of the

arbours to a modest supper, when who should pass by, with his hat on one side and an air of studied indifference to the commonplace allurements around him, but Mr. Reginald Talbot! His few weeks' residence in London had effected a revolution in him, which nevertheless could scarcely be called a reform: from an inhabitant of Connemara, or some other out-of-the-way spot, he had become a citizen of the world; but the dissipations of the town had not improved his appearance. His face, though still full, had lost its colour, and he had a lack-lustre look which so ably seconded his attempts at languor that it almost rendered him idiotic.

William Henry drew involuntarily back in the box to avoid recognition, but Mr. Talbot's eye, roving everywhere, though with a somewhat fish-like expression, in search of female beauty, had already been attracted by Margaret's pretty face. He did not quite recognise it, probably owing to the doubtful aid he derived from his spy-glass, but it was evident that he was struggling with a reminiscence.

'Why, surely that is our young friend Talbot, is it not, Samuel?' exclaimed Mr. Erin with effusion; and he held out his hand to the young man at once—not because he was glad to see him, far from it, but because he thought he was making a friend of his son welcome.

William Henry, however, was well convinced that Talbot was no longer his friend, a circumstance that had not hitherto distressed him. Indeed, he had by no means regretted their little tiff, since it had been the means of keeping Talbot away from Norfolk Street; but now that they had met again he had reasons for wishing that they had not quarrelled. The very cordiality with which the other addressed him aroused his apprehensions, for he knew that it was feigned; he would much rather, indeed, have seen him, as on the occasion when he had last met her, make advances to Margaret herself. Of her he was sure, no dandy, whether metropolitan or provincial, could, he knew, ever rival him in her affections; but this

fellow, smarting from the slight that had been put upon his muse, might injure him in other ways. He knew from experience Mr. Reginald Talbot was capable of being what at school was termed 'nasty,' *i.e.* malignant. It has been said of the great Marlborough that whenever he permitted himself a noble phrase it was a sure sign that he was about to commit a baseness; and similarly, the fact of Mr. Talbot's being upon his best behaviour was a symptom dangerous to his friends. On the present occasion he was studiously genteel.

His manner to Margaret—very different from that he generally adopted towards the fair sex—was distantly polite, while to Mr. Samuel Erin he was respectful to servility. What especially marked the abnormal condition of his mind, and showed his feelings to be under severe restraint, was that he never alluded to his own poetical genius. In speaking to William Henry the subject might well indeed have been avoided as a painful one; but that he should exercise this reticence with respect to the antiquary—to whom on a previous occasion, it will be remembered, he had mentioned within the first five minutes that he was 'a man of letters'—was something portentous. He did not indeed talk much, but he did what was a thousand times more difficult to him—he held his tongue and listened.

This circumstance, joined to his demure behaviour, caused Mr. Samuel Erin to take a much more favourable view of his son's friend than that he had originally entertained, and, finding him deeply interested in the country of his birth and in its early history, related to him at considerable length the story of the disruption of the Knight Templars, and the escape of the survivors to Ireland, of which he happened to have an account in black-letter, which he hoped, as he said, at no distant date to have the pleasure of showing Mr. Talbot under his own roof. This naturally led on to some conversation respecting the labours of Mr. Erin in the Shakespearean field, concerning which the young man paid him several compliments,

wherein what was wanted in appropriateness (for the young gentleman laboured under the disadvantage of knowing nothing whatever of the subject) was more than compensated for by their impassioned warmth. Then by an easy gradation they fell to talking on the new-found manuscripts. It amazed Mr. Erin to find that Talbot had not yet seen the Profession of Faith.

'I have been out of town, sir,' he replied—for falsehood to this son of Erin was as natural as mother's milk, and laid on like water, on the perpetual supply system—'and have not had the opportunity of seeing it, though, as you may well imagine, I have heard of little else. And that reminds me that I have a favour to ask of you. There is an old friend of mine, or rather of my late father's, Mr. Albany Wallis——'

Mr. Erin frowned. 'I have heard of the gentleman,' he put in stiffly, 'and in a sense I know him.'

'I trust you know nothing to his disadvantage, sir,' said Talbot with humility. 'I can only say that he has always spoken to me of yourself, and of your extraordinary erudition and attainments, with the greatest regard and consideration.'

'Indeed,' returned the other, still drily, but with some relaxation of stiffness in his tone, 'I am only acquainted with Mr. Wallis myself by hearsay; and judging him by the company he keeps—for he is known to be a friend of one Malone, of whom in Christian charity I will say no more than that he is a fellow whose shallow pretence and pompous ignorance would disgrace the name of charlatan—I have certainly hitherto had but a bad opinion of him.'

'Of that, sir, he is aware,' said Talbot, 'and it troubles him just now exceedingly. The sense of your ill-will has prevented him, although a near neighbour, from calling in Norfolk Street; and knowing that I was a friend of your son's, he has earnestly entreated me, in case I had the opportunity, to beg permission for him to pay you a visit.'

'From twelve to one, sir, the Shakespearean manu*scripts are* open to the inspection of all comers,' said Mr.

Erin, with a grand air. 'We invite investigation, and even criticism.'

'Any time, of course, you choose to appoint will suit my friend,' said Talbot; 'but, as he led me to understand, he has a matter of importance connected with the manuscripts to communicate to you, and somewhat of a private nature.'

'Then let him come to-morrow evening, when we shall be alone. Perhaps he would like to see William Henry.'

'I think he would, sir,' returned Talbot; and as he spoke he put his hand up to his mouth, to conceal a demoniacal grin such as one sees on a gargoyle carved by the piety of some monkish architect. 'I'll bring him to-morrow.'

During all this time William Henry and Margaret, in the opposite corner of the arbour, had carried on a smothered conversation with one another on quite a different subject, or rather, as the manner of young people is under similar circumstances, on no subject at all. It was enough to them that their hands met under the table and their hearts met under the rose. The scene they looked upon was not more bright than their hopes, nor the music they listened to more in tune than their tender fancies. When Mr. Erin pulled out his watch and pronounced it time to set out for home, it seemed to them that they had only just arrived. As for Mr. Reginald Talbot, for the last hour or so they had been totally unconscious of his presence; but when he took his leave of them, which he did with much politeness, there was something of suppressed triumph in his voice that aroused William Henry's suspicions. A shudder involuntarily seized him; he felt like a merry-maker at a festival who suddenly looks up into the sky, and perceives, instead of sunshine, 'the ragged rims of thunder brooding low.'

CHAPTER XVI.

A BOMBSHELL.

It was significant of the sensitiveness of Mr. Erin's feelings in regard to his new-found treasures, though it by no means indicated any want of soundness in his faith, that he ignored as much as possible all attacks upon their authenticity. This by no means involved his shutting his eyes to them; indeed, he had privately procured and read all that had been written about the MSS., even to that terrible letter of Lord Charlemont to Malone, in which he had said, 'I am only sorry that Steevens (the rival commentator) is not the proprietor of them,' in order (as he meant) that they might have had the additional pleasure, derived from private enmity, of exposing them. The sensations the antiquary endured from these things were something like those of Regulus rolling down a hill in his barrel stuck full of nails and knives, but he could not resist the temptation of reading them any more than a patient with hay fever in his eyes can resist rubbing them.

I have known young authors afflicted with the same mad desire of perusing all the disagreeable criticisms they can lay their hands on; but these things were much more than criticisms: they were personal imputations of the vilest kind, which at the same time no law of libel could touch. They ate into the poor antiquary's heart, but he never talked about them. If he had, perhaps they would have been made more tolerable by the sympathy of his friends and the arguments of his partisans; but, except to himself, he ignored them. He did not even mention to William Henry that one Mr. Albany Wallis, who he had reason to believe was little better than an infidel, was coming to Norfolk Street, by permission, to examine the Shakespeare papers. It weighed upon his own mind nevertheless, and he actually regretted that Frank Dennis

chanced to drop in that afternoon—loyal though he knew him to be in all other matters—lest in his lukewarm faith, if faith it could be called at all, he should let fall anything to encourage the sceptic.

Thus it came to pass that when the servant announced Mr. Reginald Talbot and Mr. Albany Wallis it was only Mr. Erin himself who felt no astonishment. William Henry was amazed, for though he had parted from his quondam friend on the previous evening on what were outwardly good terms, there had been no pretence of a renewal of friendship between them; their meeting at Vauxhall had, as we know, been accidental, and Talbot had not dropped a hint of renewing his visits to Norfolk Street. The young man had a smiling but scarcely a genial air; his manner was constrained, a thing which, being contrary to his habit, sat very ill upon him; and he addressed himself solely to his host, for which indeed his errand was a sufficient excuse.

'Permit me, sir, to introduce to you my friend, Mr. Albany Wallis; a gentleman, like yourself, well versed in Shakespearean lore.'

'Mr. Wallis's name is not unknown to me,' answered the antiquary coldly; 'I have the pleasure of speaking to the late Mr. Garrick's man of business, have I not?'

The visitor, a thin grey man, with sharp, intelligent features, by no means devoid of kindliness, bowed courteously.

'I had that honour,' he replied gravely; 'I have also been acquainted all my life with many who take an interest in the drama, especially the Shakespearean drama. That some of them differ from you, Mr. Erin, on the subject on which I have called to-day, I am of course aware, but, believe me, I come in no unfriendly spirit. I take it for granted that you and I are equally interested in the establishment of the truth.'

'It is to be hoped so,' returned the antiquary, with dignity; 'you would like, I conclude, to see the Profession.'

'Well, no, sir, not immediately. You have other documents, as I am informed, in one of which I am more particularly concerned.'

'Very good.—Margaret, this is your affair, it seems,' said the antiquary, smiling: it was a relief to his mind that the Profession at least was not about to be impugned. 'Here is the key of the chest; bring out the Shakespeare letter and verses, with the lock of hair.' For a moment or two Mr. Wallis remained silent. His eyes followed Margaret as she rose to obey her uncle's request, with a curious look of gentle commiseration in them.

'I did not know that this young lady had anything to do with these discoveries,' he answered.

'Nor has she, sir. The hair and the verses have become in a manner her own property, that is—er—under my trusteeship; but they were disinterred from a mass of ancient materials by my son here, William Henry.'

Mr. Wallis turned his face on the young gentleman thus alluded to much as a policeman flashes his dark lantern on a suspected stranger. There was no commiseration in it now; it was a keen, and even a hostile glance.

'I see; but besides the reputed epistle to Anne Hathaway, there was, I think, a note of hand purporting to be written to Shakespeare from John Hemynge.'

'I don't know as to "reputed" and "purporting," sir,' returned the antiquary stiffly, 'which are adjectives not usually applied to documents professedly genuine, at all events under the roof of their possessor.'

'You are right; I beg your pardon, Mr. Erin,' put in the visitor apologetically. 'One has no right to prejudge a case of which one has only heard an *ex-parte* statement. It is, however, that particular document which I ask to look at; a gentleman upon whose word I can rely has seen it, and assures me that the signature of John Hemynge appended to the receipt is—not to mince matters—a forgery.'

The antiquary started to his feet. 'Do you come here to *insult me, sir?*' he inquired angrily.

'No, Mr. Erin, far from it,' returned the other firmly. 'No one would be better pleased, both on your own account and on that of those belonging to you'—here his eye lit once more on Margaret, who had flushed to her forehead—'if I should find my informant mistaken. But the fact is, I possess a deed with the authentic and undoubted signature of John Hemynge, which my friend, who has seen both of them, assures me is wholly different from that attached to this new-found document. Assertion, however, as you may reasonably reply, is out of place in this matter. The question is merely one of comparison. Have you any objection to my applying that test?'

'Most certainly not, sir.—Margaret, this gentleman wishes to see the note of hand.'

Margaret brought it from the iron safe and gave it to Mr. Wallis. Her face still retained some trace of indignation, and her eyes met those of the visitor with resolution and even defiance.

'If there is fraud here,' he said to himself, 'this girl has nothing to do with it.' The behaviour of Mr. Erin had also impressed him favourably: with that of William Henry he was not so satisfied, it seemed to him to have too much *sang-froid*; but then (as he frankly confessed to himself) he had been prejudiced against him. Mr. Wallis was a man accustomed to 'thread the labyrinth of the mind' in matters more important, or at all events more serious, than literary investigation, and had a very observant eye; and the conclusion he came to was that, if there was one person in the present company more guilty than another as regards the Shakespearean fabrications (as Malone had called them), it was Mr. Frank Dennis. He had not, indeed, uttered one word; but when the girl had approached the safe there had been unmistakable signs of trouble in his face; while at this moment, when, as he (Mr. Wallis) knew, and as the other must needs *suspect*, a *damning* proof of the worthlessness of one of *these vaunted* discoveries was about to be produced, he

exhibited an anxiety and apprehension which, to do them justice, were absent from the rest.

'This is a mortgage deed executed by John Hemynge,' observed Mr. Wallis, drawing a document from his pocket, 'concerning the genuineness of which there is no dispute. It was found among the papers of the Featherstonehaugh family, to whom the nation is indebted (through my late client, David Garrick) for the Shakespeare mortgage now in the British Museum. If the signature of yonder deed tallies with it, well and good; I shall, believe me, be pleased to find it so; but if it does not do so, there can be no question as to which is the spurious one.'

He threw the mortgage on the table, and stood with an air, if not of indifference, of one who has no personal concern in the matter on hand, while Mr. Erin compared the two signatures with minuteness. Presently he beckoned to his son in an agitated manner: 'Your eyes are better than mine,' he said: 'what do you make of this?'

William Henry just glanced at the two documents in a perfunctory manner, as though he had been asked to witness some signature of a client of his employer, and quietly answered, 'They are very dissimilar; whichever is the wrong one, it can hardly be called an imitation, for it has not a letter in common with the other.'

'There is no question, young man, as to which is the wrong one,' remarked Mr. Wallis severely; 'and as to imitation, it is clear enough that such a deception, however clumsily, has been seriously attempted. The only doubt we have to clear up is, "Who is the forger?"'

Mr. Wallis's glance flashed for an instant upon Frank Dennis. He was standing apart, with his hand over the lower part of his features, and his eyes fixed on the ground. He looked like one upon whom a blow, long expected, has at last fallen.

It was strange, thought Mr. Wallis, that Talbot, who had seemed so convinced of the younger Erin's guilt, had had not a word to say about this other fellow. His own *impression—one* of those sudden convictions to which

men of his stamp are especially liable, but which they would be the last to call inspirations—was that the affair was a conspiracy, in which these two young men were alone concerned, and that its moving spirit was Dennis. Suddenly the silence was broken by Margaret's clear tones.

'Mr. Wallis himself has not examined the deeds,' she said.

'There is no need, young lady, since your uncle and cousin have already admitted the discrepancy,' returned the visitor. 'I am only following the example of that gentleman yonder'—here he indicated Frank Dennis with his forefinger—'in taking the matter for granted.'

Frank removed his hand from his mouth, showing a face ghastly pale, and quietly answered, 'I am no judge of these things; but if I had made such a charge as you have done, sir, I think, as Miss Slade suggests, that I should give myself the trouble of seeing with my own eyes whether it was substantiated.'

'Nay,' said Margaret quickly, 'I spoke not of any charge. If I thought that Mr. Wallis was making any personal accusation, I should not have addressed him at all.'

'But really, young lady,' protested Mr. Wallis, 'there must be something wrong somewhere, you know.'

'I should rather think there was,' observed Mr. Reginald Talbot, with a snigger.

'And who the devil asked your opinion?' inquired Mr. Erin, with the eager shrillness of a steam boiler which has just discovered its safety-valve. He did not forget that it was to this young gentleman's good offices that he was indebted for this unsatisfactory state of things.

'Well, I thought it was a matter of criticism,' murmured the young Irishman.

'That was the very reason, sir, you should have held your tongue,' was the uncompromising reply.

'I really don't know,' observed William Henry, who *had been idly turning* over the leaves of the mortgage *deed during this* discussion, 'why any bitterness should be

imported into this discussion. We are all equally inte-iested, as Mr. Wallis has remarked, in the establishment of the truth; and I, for my part, have nothing to fear from it. I am in no way responsible, as he must be aware, for the genuineness of the documents in question, but only for their discovery. What has happened to-day is no doubt as disagreeable as it is unlooked for; but it is no fault of mine. The only course open to me is, I suppose, to go to my friend in the Temple and acquaint him with what has happened. Perhaps he may have some explanation to offer upon the subject.'

'I should very much like to hear it,' said Mr. Wallis, with a dry smile.

Mr. Reginald Talbot also began to smile—aloud, but he caught Mr. Frank Dennis's eye, which had so unmistakably menacing an expression in it that the snigger perished in its birth.

'Shall I go, father?' inquired William Henry. For the antiquary sat like one in a dream, turning over the note of hand, once so precious to him, but which had now become waste paper.

'Yes, go! We will wait here till you come back,' he answered.

The words dropped from his lips like lead.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MARE'S NEST.

A GREAT poet has sung of a certain tea party as sitting 'all silent and all damned,' which is going pretty far as a description of social cheerlessness; but they were at tea, and had presumably bread and butter, and possibly even muffins, before them; whereas the little party in Norfolk Street, who sat awaiting the return of William Henry from his problematical patron (for Mr. Albany Wallis, for one, *did not believe* in his existence), had not even such

material comforts to mitigate their embarrassment and ennui. On the table there were only the two deeds, and one of them was in all probability a forgery. Mr. Erin sat drumming his fingers upon it and endeavouring to hide the anxiety which consumed him—a most depressing spectacle. The company, too, were on anything but good terms with one another or with themselves. Mr. Albany Wallis was a just but kind-hearted man; he knew he was right, but he was equally certain that he was uncomfortable. Margaret's beauty had touched him, and her indignation, however undeserved, distressed him. He felt convinced that she at least was innocent of any confederation with the evil-doers, whoever they were.

Now that he had once put hand to the plough, there was no possibility of drawing back; he must needs lay the whole conspiracy bare; but in his heart he cursed the officious malignity of Reginald Talbot, who had set him to work on so unpleasant a task. It was plain that that young gentleman knew how it was all to end. He lay back in his chair, tapping his boot with his cane, and with a grin on his face such as a Cheshire cat might wear who feels a mouse well under her claw. To Mr. Wallis it seemed equally clear that Mr. Frank Dennis also knew. He sat very pale and quiet, but with a face expectant of ill. Every now and then he stole a glance at Margaret, full of ineffable shame and sorrow. As for her, she looked neither to the right nor to the left, but always at the door; her ears were on the stretch for William Henry's return from the moment that his departing footstep died away. In her face alone was to be seen unshaken confidence; a woman's faith—so often wasted, as Mr. Wallis thought to himself, upon false and worthless objects.

Presently Mr. Erin glanced at her, and, seeming to gather comfort from her calmness, observed:—

'I am sorry to detain you, Mr. Wallis, but I think it better for both our sakes that you should remain here till this matter has, one way or another, been settled. It will convince you, at all events, that there is no collusion.'

'A very proper arrangement, sir, and one that does you infinite credit,' returned the other courteously. 'One word from your son's friend—that is, if, as I believe, he must needs give up his case—will be all that is necessary, so that we shall not have to wait long.'

'The gentleman may not be at home,' suggested Margaret.

'True,' answered Mr. Wallis, with a bow. In his heart he thought that the gentleman was not at all likely to be at home, but there was nothing in his tone that implied it.

'Perhaps,' said Mr. Erin, 'in order to pass the time, you would like to examine the other Shakespearean documents in my possession?'

There was a world of significance, had the other only known it, in the manner in which the antiquary thus expressed himself. The idea of looking at these treasures 'in order to pass the time' would, an hour ago, have seemed to him little short of blasphemy.

'As you please, sir,' returned Mr. Wallis indifferently; 'though you will pardon me for saying that if the note of hand turns out to be—a—that is, unauthentic, it will destroy the credibility of all the rest.'

'It will affect it, no doubt,' admitted the antiquary.

'On the other hand,' observed Margaret in her clear tones, 'if the evidence should be the other way, it will proportionately strengthen their claims.'

'Undoubtedly,' replied Mr. Wallis. He could offer that modicum of encouragement with perfect safety, and he was well pleased to have the opportunity of doing so. 'Believe me, young lady,' he went on with earnest gentleness, 'that it would give me the sincerest gratification to find your confidence justified by the result.'

Then he sat down, indifferent-eyed, but with a pretence of interest, to the Profession that Mr. Erin had spread out upon the table. It was a cheerless proceeding. The very exhibitor himself, it was plain, had but little heart for the performance; instead of expatiating with an unction that

might well have been called 'extreme' on the precious revelation, he only put in a word or two. If he had apprehensions such as he had never before experienced of a visitor's criticism, they were, however, unfounded. Mr. Wallis perhaps did not think it worth while to make objections, since a few more minutes at most must needs see the imposture out; it would have been like quarrelling with a man upon his death-bed. He even allowed that the document was 'interesting,' though, as he made the observation to Margaret and not to her uncle, it is probable that it rather expressed his wish to please her than his real sentiments. His position was somewhat similar to that of Eloise when taking the veil.

> Yet then to those dread altars as I drew,
> Not on the Cross my eyes were fixed, but you;
> Not grace, nor zeal, love only was my call.

For though, of course, the old lawyer was not in love with Margaret, he had a much greater admiration for her than for the sacred relic. Still, in spite of himself, habit induced him to give some considerable attention to the document; even if it was a forgery it was curious, and, at all events, anything was better than sitting with his hands before him watching those uncomfortable faces. That of Mr. Samuel Erin was at present particularly so, for his visitor's eye was travelling towards the 'leffee tree,' a weak point, which he felt under the circumstances in a very ill condition to defend, when suddenly there was a knock at the door.

'There is Willie!' cried Margaret, starting to her feet.

She felt assured, since so short a time had elapsed, that he had found his friend of the Temple at home; but what was the news he had brought with him?

One glance at the young fellow as he entered the room was sufficient for her. It was good news.

The eye of love is an auger that can pierce the heart, *if not the soul*; but to the other members of the party *William Henry's* face told nothing. It did not indeed

wear the expression of defeat, but still less did it exhibit triumph or exultation. It had the same quiet, almost indifferent air that it habitually wore when the Shakespearean discoveries were under discussion; but the pallor which anxiety had caused in it when he left the house upon his apparently hopeless errand was gone; with a quiet smile he drew forth a paper from his pocket, and handed it to Mr. Wallis.

'You are quite right, sir,' he said, 'and yet you have not put my friend in the wrong. It is the case of the chameleon.'

'What is this?' asked Mr. Wallis, a question which, having unfolded the paper, he proceeded to answer himself, in tones of the greatest amazement. 'Why, this is John Hemynge over again—the real John Hemynge!'

'And yet, I suppose, not more real than the other,' said William Henry quietly. 'The simple explanation is that there were two of them.'

'Two of them!' exclaimed Mr. Erin, looking much like the 'gay French mousquetaire' (only not 'gay') when he saw the ghost of his victim on one side of his bed, and her twin sister in the flesh on the other.

'This paper, I see, is an account of some theatrical disbursements,' observed Mr Wallis, biting his lips in much perplexity. 'That reminds me that the note of hand was upon a similar subject. You don't mean to tell me that these Hemynges were not only both of the same name, but of the same calling—actors?'

'I tell you nothing, sir, of my own knowledge,' answered William Henry drily, 'for I know nothing about the matter. I went to my patron with the story you bade me tell him, that you possessed an authentic signature of Shakespeare's friend Hemynge; that it was altogether different from the one appended to the note of hand I had found in his keeping, and that therefore the latter was a forgery. He only smiled, and said, "How very like a commentator!" Then he opened a little chest filled with *theatrical* memoranda. "There is nothing here of much

value," he said, "for I have examined them; but, as it happens, there is something to put the gentleman's mind at rest as to any question of fraud." Then he gave me this paper, the signature of which he bade me to ask you to compare with that on your mortgage deed. It is identical, is it not?'

'It certainly appears to be so,' admitted Mr. Wallis.

'Well, according to my patron's account, there were in Shakespeare's time two John Hemynges: the one—*your* John Hemynge—connected with Shakespeare's own theatre, "The Globe;" the other, whose receipt is appended to the note of hand, the manager of the "Curtain" Theatre. The former, it seems, was called the Tall John Hemynge, the latter the Short. If you care to know more about them, I am instructed to say that my friend is prepared to give you every information.'

As his eye fell upon the lawyer's chapfallen face, William Henry could not deny himself a smile of triumph; but as regarded his uncle and Margaret, Mr. Wallis observed that the young fellow did not so much as even glance at them—a circumstance which the lawyer attributed to a very natural cause: it was not they, but he, who had doubted of his good faith, so that in their case he had nothing to exult over. He felt very much abashed and disconcerted; nor was his embarrassment decreased when Margaret thus addressed him:—

'You will not forget, Mr. Wallis,' she said gravely, 'what was said just now of the change which would take place in your opinion of us, in case this matter should not turn out so unfavourably as you expected.'

'Nay, pardon me, young lady,' returned the lawyer gallantly, 'I have never harboured any opinion of you otherwise than favourable; my observation referred to these other documents, which indeed, I frankly confess, I am now prepared to consider in a much less prejudiced light. For the present I must take my leave, but in the meantime let me express my thanks to you, Mr. Erin, for the kind reception I have met with, and to withdraw,

without reserve, any expression I may have let fall which may be construed into a reflection upon your good faith, or upon that of any member of your family.'

For a moment it occurred to Mr. Erin that here was an opportunity for snatching an ally from the enemy's camp, by getting Mr. Albany Wallis to add his name to the list of believers; but on the whole he decided not to do so, upon the ground of the danger of the experiment. If Miss Margaret Slade, however, had asked Mr. Wallis the favour, it is doubtful whether he would not have acceded to her request. He felt such a brute at having given her distress of mind by his unmannerly suspicions, that he would have made almost any sacrifice in reparation of them. He retired with a profusion of bows and excuses, while Mr. Reginald Talbot followed in silence at his heels like a whipped dog, who, professing to find a hare in her form, has only found a mare's nest.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'WHATEVER HAPPENS, I SHALL LOVE YOU, WILLIE.'

It was not till his visitors had gone that their host seemed to become fully conscious of the gravity of their errand. While the mind is clouded with doubt it is impossible for it to entertain any emotion very acutely; but now that the accusation of the literary lawyer had been shown to be groundless, Mr. Erin became at once alive to its great wickedness and impertinence.

'The man must have been mad—stark, staring mad!' he exclaimed, 'to have come here, and upon the ground of that trumpery deed of his to have made such abominable imputations! I know that Malone is burning to see my manuscripts, though he has not the honesty to confess it, and I should not wonder if he had sent that fellow here as a spy.'

'Nay, I am sure Mr. Wallis was no spy,' said Margaret.

'Well, at all events, instead of reporting "All is barren," as was hoped,' continued the antiquary, 'he will have to speak of "milk and honey." Upon my life, I believe I could have got him to sign our Profession of Faith if I had only pressed it; for by nature, however warped by evil communications, he struck me as an honest man.'

'Not only honest, but kind, uncle,' observed Margaret gently.

'He was very civil to *you*, I noticed,' returned her uncle grimly. 'I am sure you could have got him to sign. What a thorn it would have been in that scoundrel's side if one of his lieutenants could have been seduced so far from his allegiance!'

When Mr. Erin said 'that scoundrel' he always meant Malone. It was not necessary for him—as in the case of the gentleman who had married three times, and was wont to observe, 'When I say "my wife" I mean my first wife'—to explain whom he meant.

'I don't blame Mr. Wallis at all,' said Margaret. 'He came upon a disagreeable errand, in the interests of truth, and has frankly acknowledged himself to be in the wrong. The person I do feel indignant against is that horrid Mr. Talbot.'

'"The man of letters," as he called himself,' remarked Mr. Erin contemptuously. 'He never even asked to look at the manuscripts: I don't believe he can read. What do you think of your young friend now?' he inquired, turning to William Henry.

'Well, sir, I think he has made a fool of himself and knows it.'

'You are much too good-natured, Willie,' observed Margaret indignantly. 'I am sure, Frank, you agree with me that Mr. Talbot's conduct has been most treacherous and malignant.'

Dennis had not opened his lips since William Henry's return; he had watched for it with at least as much

anxiety as the rest, but the refutation of what had been alleged seemed to have given him rather relief than satisfaction. He was too good a fellow to wish any disgrace to happen even to a rival; but (as Margaret read his behaviour) he could hardly exult in that rival's victory, which could but result in Mr. Erin's having greater confidence in the young fellow than ever, and consequently in the bettering of his chance of gaining his cousin's hand.

'Yes,' said Dennis quietly, 'William Henry has made the great mistake of allowing an Irishman of low type to be on familiar terms with him. The men of that nation, when they are of sterling nature, are among the best, as they are undoubtedly among the most agreeable, men in the world; but there are a great many counterfeits—men who, like Talbot, under the mask of *bonhomie*, conceal a morose and malignant disposition; they belong, in fact, to the same class of their fellow-countrymen who shoot men from behind a hedge.'

'Quite true,' observed Mr. Erin approvingly. 'I have never heard that type of man—to which Malone, for one, belongs—so graphically described.'

'I do hope, Willie, you will have nothing more to do with him,' said Margaret earnestly.

'You may depend upon it he will have nothing more to do with *me*,' answered the young fellow, laughing. 'He already knows what I thought of his verses; indeed, it was my telling him my honest opinion of them which has so set him against me; and now he knows what I think of himself.'

'Well said, my lad,' said the antiquary, rubbing his hands and smiling with the consciousness of triumph. 'We need not fear any malice when we are conscious of no ill-doing on our own part. My good Dennis, you look so exceedingly glum that, if one didn't know you, one would think that you had not that cause for confidence.'

'As regards what we were just talking of, that Irish *gentleman*,' observed Dennis sententiously, 'I have no

confidence in him at all. There is always reason to fear a man who carries a knife under his waistcoat.'

'Pooh, pooh, Dennis! you take such sombre views of everything.'

'At all events,' put in Margaret gently, 'Frank is not alarmed upon his own account.'

''Gad! that's true,' observed the antiquary drily: 'he takes care to let us know that these matters are no concern of his. If all these wonderful discoveries that have been vouchsafed to us these last few months should turn out to be so much waste paper, I don't think he would sleep a wink the worse for it.'

Dennis coloured to his temples, but said nothing. Perhaps he was conscious of shortcoming in Shakespearean enthusiasm, or was aware that he had not shown much exultation over the recent rout of the enemy. Margaret thought he might have said a word or two in self-defence; but what she deemed to be the cause of his silence—namely, that the whole subject of the discoveries was distasteful to him, as being associated, as it certainly was, with William Henry's success in another matter—was also an excuse for him, and she pitied him with all her heart.

To have defended him in his presence to Mr. Erin would, she felt, have been a cruel kindness, since it might have suggested a feeling more tender than pity; but a certain remorse—it was almost an act of penance—compelled her to speak of the matter afterwards to William Henry.

'My uncle is very hard upon poor Frank,' she said, 'about these manuscripts. I am sure that anything that concerns us concerns him, but he cannot be expected to feel exactly as we do in the matter.'

'No, I suppose not,' said William Henry.

'Well, of course not. It is his way to take things more philosophically than other people. I am sure he looked pleased enough when you confuted Mr. Wallis.'

'Pleased, but surprised,' returned the other drily.

'Oh, Willie, that is ungenerous of you!'

'I am only stating a fact. His face did not, I admit, exhibit disappointment, but it expressed extreme astonishment. I don't think as Mr. Erin does about these things, but I think a man should stick to his friends, especially in the presence of those by whom their honesty is called in question. Mr. Wallis noticed it, I promise you.'

'There was surely no harm in Frank looking astonished, even if he did,' said Margaret; then in a more tender tone, as though she had done enough for friendship, she added, 'I confess, however, I was not looking at him. I was looking at *you*, Willie. How marvellously you kept command of yourself, even when things seemed to be at the worst! Now confess, dear, did you not really know that you would find that document, or something like it, when you went off to the Temple?'

'What makes you say that?' he inquired quickly.

'Well, only because I seemed to read it in your face. Oh, Willie, you don't know what I went through while you were away. For though, as you often say, it is no affair of yours whether the manuscripts are genuine or not, yet——' She hesitated; she evidently found it difficult to put her thoughts into words.

'You mean that the question is one that, after all, seriously affects us,' he put in gently.

'Well, yes, because you and I are one. Perhaps it was the presence of that scheming Mr. Talbot which made you look so, but the matter seemed somehow to affect you personally. Your own honour appeared to be almost called in question.'

He shook his head, but she went on,—

'And that is why your parting look, though you didn't look at me, Willie, gave me courage to face them. I felt that you would come back to clear yourself, and to triumph over them. Of course I did not know how it would be effected, but I had faith—or perhaps,' added the girl, dropping her voice, 'it was love.'

'*Yes, it* was love,' said the young man, fondling her

hand in his own and speaking in the same low tones, while he gazed thoughtfully before him. 'Love is better than faith, for it endures. What we no longer believe in we despise, but what we have once loved we love always.'

There was silence between them for a little—the lovers' silence, which is more golden far than that of which philosophy speaks; then he addressed her with a lighter air.

'And were you really pleased,' he said, 'when I brought the deed back and made that old curmudgeon look so foolish?'

'Nay, he was no curmudgeon, Willie, and I felt as much for him as I could afford to feel; but your bringing such good news was delightful. It showed that what others prize so highly, such as this man Hemynge's signature, was for you quite a commonplace possession. It almost seemed that you have only to hold up your finger and beckon to her, as it were, and Good Luck comes to you.'

'Then the good luck I have had, and the estimation in which it has caused me to be held by others, makes you happy, Margaret?'

'Of course, it makes me proud and pleased,' she answered earnestly. 'How can it be otherwise when you are "the talk of the town"? But what gives me the greatest pleasure of all is to see that it has not spoilt you, Willie; that you take it all so quietly and prudently, which shows that you deserve these gifts of Fortune.'

'She has more in store for me yet,' he answered confidently; 'I feel it—I am sure of it, Maggie!'

'But, my dear Willie, are you not talked about enough already, and you but a lad of seventeen? You must be a glutton, a very glutton, for fame.'

'I am,' he answered vehemently, 'for fame, but not for notoriety only. I wish to be thought well of on my own account—not as the mere channel of another's thoughts. I have stuff within me which the world shall sooner or later recognise—I swear it!'

Margaret looked at him with amazement. She had hitherto had no great opinion of his talents, as we know;

but now either his enthusiasm carried her away with it, or, what was more probable, the atmosphere of love which surrounded him made him appear larger than of old. In her mind's eye she already beheld him a second Dryden, that monarch of letters of whom she had so often heard her uncle speak.

'But you will always be the same to me, Willie?' she murmured timidly.

Her humility, perhaps, touched him, for at her words he became strangely agitated, and his face grew pale to the very lips.

'Nay,' he said, 'I must ask *that* of *you*. Whatever happens, you will never cease to love me?'

'Whatever happens, Willie,' she answered softly, 'I shall love you more and more.'

CHAPTER XIX.

ANOTHER DISCOVERY.

When folks are not in accord, and especially if there is fear on one side, communication of all kinds is difficult enough, but personal companionship is well-nigh unendurable. Often and often in evenings not so long ago William Henry had hesitated to come in on his father's very door-step, and turned away into the wet and wind-swept streets rather than thrust his unwelcome companionship upon him. Not seldom, in the days between the death of his wife and Margaret's coming to Norfolk Street, Mr. Erin had left the supper-table without a word, and sought his own chamber an hour before his time, rather than endure the sight of the boy whose very existence was a reproach to him, who had had the ill taste to survive his own beloved child, and who had not a pleasure or pursuit in common with him. Now, however, all this was changed; and nothing was more significant of the alteration in the old

man's feelings towards William Henry than the satisfaction he took in his society. So close an attachment the young man might well have dispensed with, since it kept him sometimes from his Margaret; but he nevertheless was far from discouraging it, since he knew that such familiarity tended in the end to ensure her to him.

It was the antiquary's whim—or perhaps he thought that association of ideas might help to incline the young man's heart towards him—to read at night Shakespeare's plays with him, as they had been wont to do when William Henry was yet a child and no coldness had as yet sprung up between them. At times the young fellow's attention would flag a little; his thoughts would fly after his heart, which was upstairs in Margaret's keeping; but as a rule he shared, or seemed to share, the old man's enthusiasm. His comments and suggestions on the text were always received with a respect which, considering what would have been their fate had they been hazarded six months ago, was almost ludicrous. Such illogical changes in personal estimation are not unexampled; even in modern times there have been instances where the sudden acquisition of wealth, or the unexpected succession to a title, has invested its astonished possessor with attributes in no way connected with either rank or riches; in the present case the admiration expressed was, however, remarkable, because the very qualities of literary judgment and the like, which were now acknowledged, had been of old contemptuously ignored. William Henry, who had never himself ignored them, was content to find them recognised at last by whatever means, and exchanged his views upon the character of Hamlet with the antiquary with cheerful confidence and upon equal terms.

One night they were reading 'Lear' together, and had come to those lines wherein the Duke offers Kent half the administration of the kingdom. To this Kent replies,—

> I have a journey, sir, shortly to go:
> *My master* calls me; I must not say 'No.'

'*Do you not* think, sir,' observed William Henry,

'that such a couplet is somewhat inappropriate to the occasion?'

'How so?' inquired the antiquary. It was noteworthy that he took the objection with such mildness. The notion of anything in Shakespeare being inappropriate was like suggesting to a fire-worshipper that there were spots on the sun.

'Well, sir, it strikes me as somewhat too brief and trivial, considering the subject on which he speaks. Now what do you think of this by way of an emendation?' He drew from his pocket a slip of paper on which the following lines were written in his own handwriting:—

> Thanks, sir; but I go to that unknown land
> That chains each pilgrim fast within its soil,
> By living men most shunned, most dreaded.
> Still my good master this same journey took:
> He calls me; I am content, and straight obey.
> Then farewell, world; the busy scene is done:
> Kent lived most true; Kent died most like a man

The antiquary's face was a study. A few months ago it is doubtful whether anything from William Henry's pen would have obtained so much as patient consideration. Of his son's genius Mr. Erin had always thought very little; he esteemed him indeed no more worthy of the title of man of letters than his friend Mr. Talbot himself; but his productions were now on a very different plane. They demanded his best attention, and such admiration as it was possible to give.

> 'Still my good master this same journey took:
> He calls me; I am content, and straight obey,'

he murmured. 'That is harmonious and natural; a certain simplicity pervades it: yes, my lad, that is creditable.'

'I venture to think,' said the young man deferentially, 'that the opening lines—

> Thanks, sir; but I go to that unknown land, &c.—

are not devoid of merit.'

'Devoid? No, certainly not devoid. Courteous in expression and—um—to the point, but somewhat modern in tone.'

Without speaking, but with a smile full of significance, the young man produced a roll of paper and laid it before his companion.

'Great heavens! what is this?' exclaimed Mr. Erin, straightening out the manuscript with trembling fingers, while he devoured it with his eyes.

'It is something that you hoped to find at Stratford—at Clopton House,' returned William Henry quietly. 'How often have you told me that some manuscripts of Shakespeare's plays must needs be in existence somewhere! You were right; this is the original, or at all events a very early manuscript, of "Lear."'

'"Lear"? Shakespeare's "Lear"? My dear Samuel, you take my breath away. And yet the handwriting seems incontestable; and here is the jug watermark, a clear proof at least of its antiquity. You have read it, of course: does it differ from the quartos?'

'Yes, materially.'

'Thank Heaven!—I mean, how extraordinary! One can hardly, indeed, wish a line of Shakespeare's to differ from what is already engraven in our hearts; but still to get his first thoughts! Truly a rapturous day!'

'I rather think, sir,' said William Henry, 'that after investigation you will acknowledge that these were not only his first thoughts but his best thoughts. There is a polish on the gem that has heretofore been lacking. The manuscript will, if I am not mistaken, prove Shakespeare to have been a more finished writer than has been hitherto imagined. There are many new readings, but once again to refer to that speech of Kent's: you admired it in its modern form, into which I purposely cast it, confident that its merits would not escape you even in that guise; but in its proper and antique dress just be so good as to reperuse it; perhaps you will give it voice, the advantage of a trained utterance.'

Thus advised, Mr. Erin, nothing loth, repeated the lines aloud:—

> Thanks, Sir; butte I goe toe thatte unknowne land
> That chaynes each Pilgrime faste within its soyle.

He read sonorously and with a somewhat pompous air, but effectively; the dignity of the subject sustained him; moreover, the sight of the old spelling and quaint caligraphy stirred him as the clang of the trumpet moves the war-horse to exhibit his best paces.

'It is certainly very fine,' was his verdict upon his own performance. 'Who does not pronounce that speech replete with pathos and energy must resign all pretensions to poetical taste.'

'But as an emendation on the received version,' persisted William Henry—

> 'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go—

will you not admit that it compares favourably with *that?*'

'I consider it, my dear Samuel,' was the solemn reply, 'a decided improvement.'

He spoke in a tone of conviction, which admitted of no question; sudden as his conversion was (for in praising what in fact he had believed to be his son's composition he had gone to the extreme limit that his conscience would permit), it was perfectly genuine.

There are only a very few people in the world who form an independent judgment on anything upon its intrinsic merits. Most of us are the slaves of authority, or what is supposed to be authority, in matters of opinion. In letters men are almost as much victims to a name as in art. The scholar blind to the beauties of a modern poem can perceive them in an ancient one even where they do not exist. He cannot be persuaded that Æschylus was capable of writing a dull play; the antiquary prefers a *torso* of two thousand years old to a full-length figure by Canova. This may not be good sense, but it is human nature.

'*I need not* ask you,' continued Mr. Erin after a pause,

during which he gazed at the manuscript like Cortez, on his peak, at the Pacific, 'whether this precious document came from the same treasure-house as the rest?'

'Yes, sir; it almost seems as if there were no end to them. I have not yet explored half the curious papers on which my patron seems to set so little store.'

The antiquary's eyes sparkled under his shaggy brows; if the young man had read his very heart he could not have replied to its secret thoughts more pertinently. An hour before, he had hardly dreamt of the existence of such a prize, but, now that it had been found, it at once began to suggest the most magnificent possibilities. This was the first, but why should it be the last? If the manuscript of the 'Lear' had survived all the accidents of time and chance, why not that of 'Hamlet' also—the 'Hamlet,' with its ambiguous utterances, so differently rendered by the Shakespearean oracles, and which stood so much in need of an authoritative exponent?

When a man (for no merit of his own beyond a little bribery at elections) is made a baronet, he is not so enraptured but that he beholds in the perspective a peerage, and even dreams that upon a somewhat ampler waistcoat (but still his own) may one day repose the broad riband of the Garter.

'What is very remarkable in the present manuscript,' continued William Henry, 'is that it is free from the ribaldry which but too often disfigures the plays of Shakespeare.'

'The taste of the time was somewhat coarse,' observed Mr. Erin. It was almost incredible even to himself, but he felt that his tone was deprecatory; he was actually making apologies for the Bard of Avon to this young gentleman of seventeen.

'Nevertheless I cannot believe that Shakespeare pandered to it,' observed William Henry gravely. 'These things are in my opinion introduced by the players of the period, and afterwards inserted in the stage copies of the plays from which they were literally printed; and thus the

ear of England has been abused. If the discovery of this manuscript should clear Shakespeare's memory from these ignoble stains, it will be a subject of national congratulation.'

'Very true,' assented Mr. Erin. He felt that the remark was insufficient, wanting in enthusiasm, and altogether upon a lower level than the other's arguments; but the fact was, his mind was dwelling upon more personal considerations. He was reflecting upon his own high position as the proprietor of this unique treasure, and on what Malone would say *now*.

These reflections, while they filled him with self-complacency, made him set a higher value upon William Henry than ever; for, like the magician in the Arabian story, he could do nothing without his Aladdheen to help him.

CHAPTER XX.

A TRUE LOVER.

If Mr. Erin imagined that 'what Malone would say *now*' —i.e. after the discovery of the 'Lear' manuscript—must needs be in the way of apology and penitence, he was doomed to disappointment. So far from the circumstance carrying conviction to the soul of that commentator, and making him remorseful for his past transgressions, it seemed to incite him to the greater insolence, just as (so Mr. Erin expressed it) the discovery of a new Scripture might have incited the devil not only against it, but against the old ones. He reiterated all his old objections, and fortified them with new ones; he refused to accept the testimony of the Hemynge note of hand, which had satisfied his friend and ally Mr. Wallis; he repeated his horrid suggestions that the Shakespeare lock was a girl's ringlet, and, *in a word, 'raged'* like the heathen. Having declined to

look at the 'Lear' upon the ground of 'life being too short for the examination of such trash,' he pronounced it to be 'plain and palpable forgery.' 'Three words,' he said, 'would suffice for the matter,' and published 'An Inquiry into Certain Papers attributed to Shakespeare,' extending to four hundred pages quarto.

Whereto Mr. Erin responded at equal length, with 'a studious avoidance of the personality which Mr. Malone had imported into the controversy,' but at the same time taking the liberty to observe that in acting his various parts on the stage of life, Fortune had denied that gentleman every quality essential to each, inasmuch as he was a critic without taste, a poet without imagination, a scholar without learning, a wit without humour, an antiquary without the least knowledge of antiquity, and a man of gallantry, in his dotage. This was a very pretty quarrel as it stood; but, far from being confined to two antagonists, it was taken up by scores on each side: it was no longer 'a gentle passage of arms,' as the combat *à outrance* used to be euphoniously called, but a mêlée. Only the ancient rules of a fair fight were utterly disregarded; both parties went at it hammer and tongs, and hit one another anywhere and with anything. One would have almost imagined that instead of a disagreement among scholars it had been a theological controversy.

To the statement that no one who was not a fool or a knave believed in the Shakespearean manuscripts, Mr. Samuel Erin, scorning to make any particular rejoinder, replied by simply publishing a list of those who had appended their names to his certificate. To this he added a foot-note stating the opinion which Dr. Parr had expressed concerning the Profession—namely, that there were many beautiful things in the liturgy of the Church of England, but all inferior to it, which produced a vehement disavowal from that hot-tempered cleric; he mentioned that he had *never stated* anything so foolish, and that the words in *question had* been used by Dr. Warton, an observation *which caused* some coolness between the two learned divines.

To say that William Henry, the football between these two opposing parties, enjoyed it, would be an exaggeration; he liked being in the air—and, indeed, he was lauded by many persons to the very skies—but did not so much relish the being knocked and trodden under foot below.

As a popular poet once remarked of the reviewers, 'I like their eulogies well enough, but d—n their criticisms,' so the young man would have preferred his notoriety to have been without this alloy; but on the whole it pleased him vastly.

Margaret was almost angry with him for taking men's hard words so coolly, but comforted herself by reflecting that her Willie must have a heavenly temper.

'As for me,' she would say, 'I could scratch their eyes out. It drives me wild to listen to what uncle sometimes reads aloud out of their horrid pamphlets.'

To which the young fellow would gallantly reply, 'To have such a partisan, who would not compound for fifty such detractors? And, after all, these good people have a right to their own opinions, though it must be confessed they express them with some intemperance. I have given them the "Lear" manuscript, but I cannot give them the taste and poetic feeling necessary to appreciate it.'

What of course had wounded Margaret was not their antagonistic criticism, nor even their supercilious contempt, but the accusations they had not scrupled to make against William Henry's good faith. One does not talk of the 'poetic feeling' of a hostile jury. But love has as many causes of admiration as Burton in his 'Anatomy' finds for melancholy; and the young fellow's very carelessness about these charges was, in Margaret's eyes, a feather in his cap, and proved, for one thing, their absolute want of foundation. If she did not understand all the niceties of the points of difference between the 'Lear' manuscript and the 'Lear' as it was printed in her uncle's quarto edition of the play, it was not for want of instruction. There was little else talked of in Norfolk Street, which *was perhaps* one of the reasons which made the visits of

Frank Dennis still more rare. It was clear that the whole subject of the Shakespearean discoveries was distasteful to him; and it must be confessed that he did not even affect that interest in them which good breeding, and indeed good nature, would have seemed to suggest. As to the comparative merits of the old and new readings, or rather, as Mr. Erin maintained, of the accepted and the original text, he had no opinion to offer one way or the other. 'I am no critic,' he would say; 'so that while my differing from you might give you some annoyance, my agreement with you could afford you no satisfaction'—a remark that did not by any means content the antiquary.

When one's friends have no opinions of their own it cannot surely hurt them to adopt *our* opinions, and it is only reasonable that they should do so. It was quite a comfort (because not wholly looked for) to find that when pushed home on a subject within his own judgment Mr. Dennis's heart in these matters was at least in the right place. Thus, when referring one day to the onslaughts of his opponents, Mr. Erin instanced as an example of their microscopic depravity a certain objection that had been made to the Hemynge's note of hand. 'You know, of course, my good fellow, how it has been proved beyond all dispute that there were two John Hemynges.'

'I was here when Mr. Albany Wallis came and the other deed was found,' was the young man's reply.

'Tut! tut! why, that of course; but, dear me, how behindhand you are! One would really have thought as an old friend, however little interest you take in these matters for their own sake, that you would have kept abreast with us so far. Why, this receipt here has been found since then, with a memorandum in the bard's own hand, "*Receipt forre moneyes givenne me bye the talle Hemynge onne accounte o' the Curtain Theatre.*"'

'I did not happen to have heard of it,' said Dennis, regarding the new-found treasure, if not with indifference, *certainly with some* lack of rapture.

'*Well, now* you see it,' continued Mr. Erin, with irrita-

tion. 'Of course it disposes of all doubt in that direction. But now, forsooth, the note of hand is objected to upon the ground of its seals.'

'Good heavens!' ejaculated Dennis, and this time it was evident that he was really moved.

'No wonder you are indignant. I now remember that I drew your particular attention to the document in question. Well, it is almost incredible that their accusation has shrunk to the puny charge that a note of hand, even in Shakespeare's time, would not have had seals appended to it. Is it not amazing that human nature can stoop to such detraction? If it had been Malone—a mere reptile—who makes a point of the Globe being a theatre instead of a playhouse; but this is some lawyer, it seems, a child of the devil, I'll warrant, like the rest of his craft.'

Considering that William Henry, now Mr. Erin's 'dear Samuel,' had been articled to a conveyancer with the idea of becoming a lawyer himself when full grown, this was a somewhat sweeping as well as severe remark; but, carried away by the torrent of his wrath, the speaker was wholly unconscious of this little inconsistency.

'As if everyone did not know,' he continued—'not to mention the fact that in Malone's own prolegomena the Curtain Theatre is so called in Stackwood's sermon, A.D. 1578—that in the Elizabethan times everyone not only spelt as he liked, and differently at different times, but appended seals to his documents or did without them, as opportunity served. Is it not even probable that Hemynge, being a player and knowing little of business, may have been particularly solicitous of every form of law being observed, however superfluous, and in even so small a matter? Is it not in accordance, I ask, with what we know of human nature that it should be so?'

It was clear that this was no extempore speech, nor even a discourse the claims of which could be satisfied by pen and ink, but one very evidently intended to be printed. Its deliverance gave Frank Dennis time to recover from a

certain dismay into which Mr. Erin's communication had thrown him.

'Just so,' he said; 'you are right, no doubt. The objection as to its being contrary to custom to append seals seems frivolous enough.'

'And the ground has been cut away from the first, you see, in all other directions,' exclaimed the antiquary triumphantly. 'Margaret,' he continued in high good humour as his niece entered the room, 'permit me to introduce to you a convert. Mr. Frank Dennis has been hitherto little better than a sceptic, but the light of truth is beginning to dawn upon him through crannies. He has been moved to confess that the note of hand at least is genuine. I have a letter to write before the post goes out, so will leave him in your hands to continue the work of conversion.'

The door closed behind him before Frank Dennis, always slow of speech, could form his reply; but he gave Margaret the benefit of it.

'I never told your uncle,' he said in a grave, pained voice, 'that I believed the note of hand to be genuine.'

'What *does* it matter?' exclaimed Margaret reproachfully. 'I cannot tell you how these miserable disagreements distress me; of themselves, indeed, they are of no consequence, but they irritate my uncle, and have a still worse effect, Frank, upon you. I can ascribe it to no other cause, indeed, that you have almost entirely ceased to visit us.'

This was not quite true; moreover, it was a dangerous assertion to make, likely to draw upon her the very reproach she had always feared, and which she felt was not undeserved. She trembled lest he should reply, 'No, that was not the reason; it is because you have preferred William Henry's love to mine.'

It was to her relief, therefore, though also to her great surprise, that he answered in his habitual quiet tone, '*Perhaps it is,* Margaret.'

She did not believe it was, and was convinced that in

saying so he had laid a burthen upon his conscience for her sake. His nature, she well knew, was so honest and simple that it shrank from even an evasion of the truth, and the very fact of his having thus evaded it to spare her showed her the depth of his affection. If he, then, still loved her, was it not cruel, she reflected, to ask him to her home to witness her happiness with another? She would miss his company, for that was always pleasant to her as that of a tender and faithful friend; but was it not selfish of her to invite it? It was obvious that he came unwillingly, and only in obedience to her behest. If she ceased to importune him he would certainly cease to come, but she would not lose his friendship. When—that is, if—Willie and she were married, it would be different with him; he would then come and see them as the friend of both.

'Of course it's very unfortunate,' she stammered, with her eyes fixed on the ground, 'but since my uncle is so thin-skinned about these manuscripts, and you, as he says, are so dreadfully sceptical, it would perhaps be better—until the whole affair has subsided——'

She looked up for a moment in her embarrassment of speech and met Frank's face; it was gazing at her with an expression of pain and pity and patience which she did not understand, and which increased her perplexity.

'Yes, Margaret, you are right,' he said; 'I am better away from here for the present. My coming can do no good, and, as you have surmised, it gives me pain.'

At this the blood rushed to her cheeks, but he went on in the same quiet, resolute tone, as though he had made no reference to his love for her at all.

'When one cannot say what one will, even when nature dictates it, it is clear that one is in a false position. I shall not come to Norfolk Street any more.'

'But you are not going away—I mean from your home?' exclaimed the girl, alarmed by an expression in his face which seemed to forebode some worse thing than his words implied.

'No, Margaret; I shall be at home, where a word from you will find me at your service always—*always.*'

He spoke with such a tender stress upon the word that she felt a great remorse for what she had done to him, though indeed it had been no fault of hers. It is impossible, under the present conditions of society at least, that a young woman should make two young men happy at once; one of them must go to the wall. Perhaps if this one had put himself forward instead of the other, matters might have been otherwise; the peach falls to the hand that is readiest. There are men that never win the woman they love till she becomes a widow; for my part, in the meantime—but I am writing of Frank Dennis. He was of a patient disposition, and had a very moderate opinion of himself. And yet his love for Margaret was great, and so genuine that he could have been content to see her happy with another man. Why he was not now content was because he did not think she would be happy; but he did not tell her so, for, though honesty might suggest his doing so, honour forbade him. There is an honour quite different from that of the fanfaronnading sort, one which has nothing to do with running a fellow-creature through for a hasty word, or with ruining some one else to pay our card debts—a delicate, scrupulous sense of what is becoming even in our relations with our enemies, a flower of a modest colour which grows in the shade. This was the sort of honour that Frank Dennis possessed, and which prompted him now to keep silence, when he might have said something which would have been much to his own advantage.

'Good-bye, Margaret,' was all he said as he took her hand in his. He would, if he could, have even eliminated a certain tenderness from his tone, because he knew it gave her pain; but he could not so utterly conquer nature.

'Good-bye, Frank,' was all she said in reply, or dared to say.

She was thinking of him, and not of herself at all.

was pity for him which made her voice falter and her soul quail within her, lest at that supreme moment he should have demanded from her, once for all, another sort of dismissal.

As to love, her heart was loyal to her Willie; and yet, though she would not have confessed it even to herself, she had a secret sense as the door closed upon this other one that she had burned her boats.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TIFF.

When one is not *en rapport* with one's friends about any particular subject, in which for the time they are interested, it is better to leave them, for it is certain they would rather have our room than our company. If you happen to be at Bullock Smithy, for example, during a contested election, when your host at the Hall and all his family are looking forward to the regeneration of the species—conditional upon the return of Mr. Brown—and you don't much care about it yourself (or even doubt of its being accomplished that way), you had better for the present leave the Hall, and revisit it under less exciting circumstances. They will politely lament your departure, but privately be very glad to get rid of you. You may be (you *are*) a charming person, but just now you are a little in the way. They resent your presence as spirit-rappers resent that of 'the sceptic,' as they call everyone endowed with reason and common sense. The common harmony is disturbed by it as by a false note.

Thus it happened that the withdrawal of Frank Dennis from his friends in Norfolk Street was upon the whole a relief to them. They could talk unreservedly among themselves of the subject that lay next their hearts,

and which was really assuming great importance for all of them.

If the mere amount of the Shakespearean manuscripts could have assured, as it undoubtedly made more probable, their authenticity, the voice of detraction ought to have been silenced; for there was some new discovery made in that wonderful treasure-chamber of the Temple almost every day. Contracts and mortgages, theatrical disbursements, miscellaneous letters, deeds of gift, all immediately relating to Shakespeare, if not in his very hand, were constantly being found. Records which a few months ago would have filled Mr. Erin's heart with rapture were now, indeed, welcomed by him, but almost as a matter of course. 'The gentleman of considerable property in the Temple,' as the antiquary had been wont to vaguely term him, had now grown as familiar to him as though he had had a name as well as a local habitation.

'Well, what news from our friend to-day, Samuel?' was the cheery question he would address to his son on his return home every evening, and it was very seldom that there was no news.

Mr. Erin, indeed, had cause to be grateful to this unknown person, since he had (though not without reluctance) given permission for the publication of the papers, which had accordingly been advertised to appear in a handsome quarto at two guineas. They included all the documents, the 'Lear' (of which unfortunately three leaves were missing), and a few pages of 'Hamlet.' These last differed but little from those of the accepted text, a circumstance which did not escape the notice of the enemy, who did not hesitate to aver that the forger, whoever he was, had found 'Hamlet' too difficult a nut to crack.

The best reply, as Mr. Erin wisely concluded, to so coarse a sarcasm was the publication of Shakespeare's Deed of Trust, conveying the 'Lear' to John Hemynge, *in which he said,* 'Should this bee everre agayne Im*pryntedd, I doe* order tyhatt itte bee so doun from this

mye true written Playe, and nott from those now prynted'—an injunction which, had there been an entire copy extant, would doubtless have included the 'Hamlet' also.

To the 'Miscellaneous papers and legal instruments, under the hand and seal of William Shakespeare, including the tragedy of "King Lear" and a small fragment of "Hamlet,"' was prefixed a preface by Mr. Erin himself, setting forth the circumstances under which they had come into his possession, challenging criticism and defying inquiry. This publication was of course the crucial test. While our opinions are expressed *viva voce*, or even with pen and ink, they are of little consequence to the world at large, however much they may affect our little circle of friends and enemies. I know many persons who might have remained in possession of great works of genius in manuscript had they not been so indiscreet as to print them; the annalist's sarcasm of *nisi imperasset* applies to authors as well as kings.

The book evoked a storm of censure. 'My eyes will scarcely permit me to read it,' wrote Malone ('posturing as a sick lion,' sneered Mr. Erin), 'but I have read enough to convince me that the whole production is a forgery.' Others fell foul of the style, the ideas, the very punctuation of the discovered manuscripts. They acknowledged that the phraseology was simple, but added that 'it was that sort of simplicity that belongs to the fool.' As it was some time before the advocates of the discovery could get out their rejoinders—with which many of those who had signed the certificate were busy—Mr. Samuel Erin had for the present a pretty time of it. He was like a man caught in a downpour of hailstones without an umbrella. He never blenched, however, for a single instant; one would have thought that waterproofs and overalls had been invented before his time for his especial behalf. But poor Margaret trembled and shivered. How could people be so wicked as to say such things of Willie! She would not have been so distressed had she not seen that he shrank

from these stings himself. Womanlike, she concealed her own pain and strove to comfort him.

'As for these imputations upon your honour, Willie, they are not worth thinking of; it is as though they called you a negro, when everyone who has ever seen you knows you to be a white man. Still less need you trouble yourself about their criticisms; for what can it matter to you whether the manuscript, or the printed copy, of Shakespeare's works has the greater worth?'

'That's true,' assented the young fellow; but by his knitted brows and downcast looks she knew that it did matter to him nevertheless.

'This is what I have always feared for you, should you publish a book of your own,' she went on earnestly. 'You are so sensitive, darling. How thankful I am that Shakespeare (who can afford to smile at it) is bearing the brunt of all this, and not you!'

Then came the 'rejoinders,' like sunshine after storm. 'There was not an ingenuous character or disinterested individual in the whole circle of literature,' wrote one enthusiastic partisan, 'to whom the manuscripts had been subjected who was not convinced of their authenticity.' They had 'not only convinced the scholar and the antiquary, but the paper-maker.' As to the secrecy observed with respect to their origin and possessor, 'what becomes of the acumen of the critic if such details are necessary to establish the genuineness of such a production? His occupation is gone.' As to the intrinsic merits of the 'Lear,' the seal of Shakespeare's genius was stamped upon it. 'A wit so pregnant, an imagination so unbounded, a knowledge so intuitive of the weakness of the human heart as was here exhibited could belong to no other man. If it was not his, it was inspiration itself.'

'Here, indeed,' thought William Henry, 'is something like criticism. This is an independent opinion with which the carping of prejudice or personal malevolence is not to be mentioned in the same breath.'

And, indeed, if these eulogies had been the products

of the best minds in the most perfect state of equilibrium they could scarcely have given him a more exquisite gratification. He had a sensation about his forehead as though a wreath of laurels rested there, or even a halo. He touched the stars with his head, and if he moved upon the earth at all it was on wings. It was delightful to Margaret to see him thus. She hardly recognised in him, exultant and self-conscious, the same young fellow whom she had known depressed and obscure. She was proud beyond measure of the position he had made for himself in the world of letters, but happier still because it seemed to make him hers, to put her uncle's consent to their union beyond all question. Yet, as love's fashion is, she still pictured to herself at times delays, opposition, and even obstacles.

'We must not be too sure, my darling,' she said to him lovingly one day, 'though all things seem to smile on us. It is but the promise after all, the bud but not the flower, the blossom but not the fruit.'

'True,' he answered thoughtfully; 'all this is but a mock engagement; the battle has yet to come. It is something, however, that the fighting will be on the same field; one at least knows the ground.'

She stared at him, in doubt as to what he meant; then, as if alarmed by her wondering looks, he stammered out, 'I was thinking of Mr. Erin; we now know him thoroughly, or rather he has become another man from what he was.'

'My uncle has changed, no doubt, and for the better,' she said.

'There is change everywhere, and for the better,' he answered, smiling.

He took from his pocket one of the printed cards which were now formally issued to purchasers of the lately published volume for leave to examine the manuscripts.

SHAKESPEARE.
Admit Albany Wallis, a subscriber, to view the papers.

'Think of Mr. Wallis having bought the book! Malone and he have quarrelled about it, it seems.'

'Not about the book,' put in Margaret quietly; 'I am afraid he is not even yet a true believer, but I like him better for having bought the book than even if he were. He felt he had behaved badly to us when he came here with that wretched Mr. Talbot, and his purchase of it was by way of making some amends. Where he differed from Mr. Malone was about the John Hemynge deed you brought from the Temple; Mr. Malone has had the malevolence to stigmatise even that as a forgery; but, as Mr. Wallis points out, since you were away from Norfolk Street only three-quarters of an hour, such a fraud was impossible and out of the question. He is a just man with a mind open to conviction, and he has had the courage to confess himself in the wrong.'

'Who ever told you all this?' inquired William Henry in amazement.

'A person who is no friend of his, but, like him, has a generous nature.'

'Methinks you do protest too much,' observed the young man drily. 'No one was saying anything against your informant, who it was easy to perceive was Mr. Frank Dennis. I thought he had literally withdrawn his countenance from us of late, as he has done long ago in another sense.'

'No one can control his own opinions, Willie,' said Margaret gently. 'I have heard you yourself say a hundred times, concerning this very matter, that everyone had a right to them; but, since the very knowledge of Frank's entertaining certain views (though he never expressed them except upon compulsion) was an annoyance to my uncle, he thought it better to absent himself.'

'But still you meet him elsewhere?'

'I met him in the street the other day by accident. He gave me, it is true, the information I have just given to you, but he did not volunteer it. It was I who spoke to him first about Mr. Wallis.'

'It seems he took great care to undeceive you as to that gentleman's having any belief in me.'

'In *you*, Willie? We never even spoke of *you*.'

This was very true: he had become a subject to which, for Frank's sake, she never alluded in Frank's presence.

'Well, of course I am not responsible for the manuscripts; but do you suppose that Dennis was thinking of them, for which he does not care one farthing, even if he was talking of them? He was thinking of *me*. When he depreciates them to you he depreciates me; when he quotes the opinion of Mr. Wallis or of anyone else he is quoting it against me. You need not blush, Margaret, as if my mind had just awakened to a suspicion of the truth. Do you suppose I don't know what Mr. Frank Dennis has been after, all along?'

'I will not pretend to be ignorant of what you mean, Willie,' said Margaret firmly, 'but you are quite mistaken if you imagine that Frank Dennis has ever breathed a word to me, or, as I believe, to anyone, to your disadvantage: he has a loyal heart and is a true friend.'

'A friend, indeed!' said William Henry scornfully.

'Yes, indeed and in need. I will lay my life on it, Willie. A man who detests all falsehood and deceit, and even if he entertained an unworthy thought of a rival would hold his peace about him.'

'That is why, no doubt, he did not speak of me,' put in the young man bitterly. 'Detraction can be conveyed by silence as well as by a forked tongue.'

'You are both unjust and unkind, Willie.'

'Still the fact remains that, whenever you see this gentleman, I do not rise—I will not say by comparison, because I believe you love me—but I do not rise in your opinion. You cannot deny it; your face confesses it. Under these circumstances you can hardly think me unreasonable if I ask you for the present not to meet Mr. Frank Dennis, even "by accident in the street."'

'I will not speak to him, Willie, if you object to it;'

said Margaret in a low voice. She was the more distressed at what he had said because she had a secret consciousness that it was not undeserved. He did not indeed sink in her opinion after her talks with Frank, and certainly did not suffer by contrast; but, on the other hand, he did not rise, while her confidence in the genuineness of the Shakespearean documents did sink.

Thence arose misgivings as to the future, doubts whether Willie would be permitted to win her, and a certain unsteadiness, not indeed of purpose, but of outlook.

'Of course you must speak to him if you meet him, Maggie,' continued William Henry in a tone from which all irritation had disappeared; 'only for the present do not seek his society. You will not long have to deny yourself the pleasure, since in a few weeks—that is, I intend very shortly to ask Mr. Erin to give you to me for my very own.'

'Oh, Willie! He will never do it,' she returned, not however with much conviction, but as one who toys with doubt. 'I am sure he does not dream of your having such an intention.'

'Then he must be as blind as Gloster, Maggie.'

This allusion to the 'Lear' was somehow—it would have been difficult to say why—unwelcome to her. Love no doubt depends upon very small and comparatively mundane matters, but still that her hopes of marriage with her lover should hang upon the general belief in the genuineness of an old manuscript seemed a little humiliating. She would have far preferred, had it been possible, that William Henry should have won his way to a modest competence by his own pen. Perhaps he had hopes of this, and some surprise in store for her; or why should he have used that phrase 'in a few weeks'? It was true that he had substituted for it a more vague expression, but she could not help thinking that he had some definite plan in his mind to precipitate events. What *could* it be?

CHAPTER XXII.

A BARGAIN.

'THE book goes bravely, Samuel,' observed Mr. Erin, as father and son were sitting together one evening with Margaret between them. William Henry's hand was resting on the back of her chair, and at times he addressed her in tones so low that his words must needs have had no more meaning for a third person than if they had been in a foreign tongue. Yet both his contiguity and his confidences remained unreproved. Perhaps among other recently developed virtues in the young man it was put down by Mr. Erin (who himself had a quick eye for the main chance) to William Henry's credit that he never questioned his father's right to treat the Shakespearean papers as his own, or demanded any account of his stewardship with respect to them.

The antiquary, however, had scruples of his own, which, if they did not compel him to part with hard money, induced him to look upon his milch cow with very lenient and indulgent eyes.

It was surely only natural that these two young people should entertain a very strong mutual attachment; through long familiarity they doubtless seemed more like brother and sister to one another than cousins. It could not be said, in short, that Mr. Erin winked at their love-making, but he shut his eyes to it. It would have been very inconvenient to have said 'No' to a certain question, and quite impossible to say 'Yes.' It was better that things should take their own course, even if it was a little dangerous, than to make matters uncomfortable by interference.

'From first to last, my lad,' he continued in a cheerful voice, 'we shall make little short of 500*l*., I expect.'

'Indeed,' said William Henry indifferently. 'To do

him justice he cared little for money at any time, and just now less than usual. His appetite, even for fame, had for the present lost its keenness. Love possessed him wholly; he cared only for Margaret.

'To think that a new reading of an old play—though to be sure it is Shakespeare's play—should produce so much!' went on Mr. Erin complacently. 'Good heavens! what would not the public give for a new play by the immortal bard!'

'The question is,' observed William Henry, 'what would *you* give, Mr. Erin?'

The remark was so unexpected, and delivered in such a quiet tone, that for a moment the antiquary was dumbfounded, and between disbelief and expectancy made no reply.

'My dear Samuel,' he murmured presently, 'is it possible you can be serious, that you have in your possession——'

'Nay, sir,' interrupted the young man, smiling; 'I never said that. I do not possess it, but within the last few days I have known of the existence of such a manuscript.'

'You have known and not told me!' exclaimed the antiquary reproachfully: 'why, I might have died in the meantime!'

'Then you would have seen Shakespeare, and he would have told you all about it,' returned William Henry lightly.

'Do not answer your father like that,' said Margaret in low, reproving tones.

It was plain, indeed, that Mr. Erin was greatly agitated. His eyes were fixed upon his son, but without speculation in them. He looked like one in a trance, to whom has been vouchsafed some wondrous vision.

'I know what is best,' returned the young man under his breath, pressing Margaret's shoulder with his hand. His arm still hung over her chair; his manner was studiously unmoved, as becomes the master of a situation.

'Where is it?' gasped the old man.

'In the Temple. I have not yet obtained permission to bring it away. Until I could do that I felt it was useless to speak about the matter—that I should only be discredited. Even you yourself, unless you saw the manuscript, might hesitate to believe in its authenticity.'

'The manuscript?' exclaimed Mr. Erin, his mind too monopolised by the splendour of the discovery to descend to detail: 'you have really seen it, then, with your own eyes? An unacted play of Shakespeare's!'

'An unpublished one, at all events. I have certainly seen it, and within these two hours, but only in my patron's presence.'

'He said that whatever you found was to be yours,' exclaimed Mr. Erin petulantly.

'Well, up to this time he has been as good as his word,' said William Henry, smiling.

'Indeed he has,' remarked Margaret. 'We must not be ungrateful, uncle.'

'Nevertheless, people should perform what they promise,' observed the antiquary severely.

For the second time Margaret felt a gentle pressure upon her shoulder; it seemed as though Willie had whispered, 'You hear that.'

'The play is called "Vortigern and Rowena,"' continued the young man.

'An admirable subject,' murmured the antiquary ecstatically.

'It is, of course, historical; there are Hengist and Horsus.'

'Horsa,' suggested Mr. Erin.

'Shakespeare writes it Horsus; Horsa was perhaps his sister.'

'Perhaps,' admitted the antiquary, with prompt adhesion. 'And the treatment? How does it rank as regards his other productions?'

'Nay, sir, that is for you to judge; I am no critic.'

'But you tell me that your patron will not part with it.'

'I have not yet persuaded him to do so; but I by no means despair of it, and in the meantime I have a copy of it.'

'My *dear* Samuel!'

'At first I tried to commit it to memory, but found the task beyond my powers. It is a very long play.'

'The longer the better,' murmured the antiquary.

'But not when one has to get it by heart,' observed William Henry drily. His tone and manner were more in contrast to those of the elder man than ever; as one grew heated the other seemed to grow cooler and cooler. There was no question as to which of them, just at present, was likely to prove the better hand at a bargain.

'But why do you talk thus, Samuel? The play, the play's the thing; since you have it why do you not produce it? You cannot imagine that delay—indeed, that anything—can enhance the interest I feel in this most marvellous of our discoveries.'

William Henry's face grew very grave.

'It is true that whatever is mine is yours, in a sense,' he said: 'but still you must pardon me for remarking that they are *my* discoveries.'

Margaret started in her chair: if she had not felt William Henry's grasp upon her wrist—for he had shifted his position and was confronting the antiquary face to face—she would have risen from it. She had never given her cousin credit for such self-assertion, and she trembled for its result. She did not even yet suspect it had a motive in which she herself was concerned; but the situation alarmed her. It was like that of some audacious clerk who demands of his master a partnership, with a certain difference that made it even graver.

'What is it you want?' inquired the antiquary. He too had become conscious that the relations between William Henry and himself were about to enter on a new phase: nevertheless his tone was conciliatory, like that of a man who, though somewhat tried, cannot afford to quarrel with his bread-and-butter.

'I am the last man, I hope, to be illiberal,' he continued. 'If I were dealing with a stranger I should frankly own that what you have, or rather, hope to have, to dispose of is a valuable commodity; to me, indeed, as you know, it is more valuable than to any mere dealer in such wares. Nevertheless I hope you will be reasonable; after all, it is a question of what the thing will fetch. I suppose you will not ask a fancy price?'

William Henry smiled. 'Well, some people might think it so, Mr. Erin, but it is not money at all that I require of you.'

'Not money?' echoed the antiquary in a voice of great relief. 'Well, that indeed shows a proper spirit. I am really pleased to find that we are to have no haggling over a matter of this kind, which in truth would be little short of a sacrilege. If you have fixed your mind upon any of my poor possessions, though it should even be the "Decameron," the earliest edition extant, and complete except for the title-page——'

'It is not the "Decameron," sir.'

'Or the quarto of 1623, with marginal notes in my own hand. But no; that is a small matter indeed by comparison with this magnificent discovery. I hardly know what I have which would in any way appear to you an equivalent; but be assured that anything at my disposal is very much at your service.'

'Then if you please, sir, I will take Margaret.'

'Margaret!' Mr. Erin repeated the name in tones of such supreme amazement as could not have been exceeded had the young man stipulated for his wig. Perhaps his surprise was a little simulated, which was certainly not the case with Margaret herself; she sat in silence, covered with blushes, and with her eyes fixed on the table before her, very much frightened, but by no means 'hurt.' While she trembled at Willie's audacity she admired it.

Mr. Erin shot a glance at her which convinced him that he would get no help from that quarter. If she had not been cognizant of the young fellow's intention it was

clear that the proposal he had made was not displeasing to her. The antiquary ransacked his mind for an objection that would meet the case: there were plenty of them there, but none of them fit for use and at the same time strong enough. A very powerful one at once occurred to him in the question, 'What do you propose to live upon?' but unhappily the answer was equally obvious, 'Upon *you!*' A most intolerable suggestion, but one which—on the brink of a bargain—it was not convenient to combat.

For a moment, too, the objection of consanguinity occurred to him, that they were cousins; an admirable plea, because it was quite insurmountable: but though this might have had its weight with Margaret, he doubted of its efficacy in William Henry's case, inasmuch as he probably knew that they were *not* cousins. To have this question raised in the young lady's presence—or indeed at all—was not to be thought of. In the end he had to content himself with the commonplace argument of immaturity, unsatisfactory at the best, since it only delays the evil day.

'Margaret? You surely cannot be serious, my dear lad. Why, your united ages scarcely make up that of a marriageable man. This is really too ridiculous. You are not eighteen.'

The rejoinder that that was an objection which time could be relied on to remove was obvious, but William Henry did not make it. He was not only playing for a great stake; it was necessary that it should be paid in ready money.

'I venture to think, Mr. Erin,' he said respectfully, 'that our case is somewhat exceptional. We have known one another for a long time, and very intimately; it is not a question of calf love. Moreover, to be frank with you, my value in your eyes is now at its highest. You may learn to esteem me more; I trust you may; but as time goes on I cannot hope commercially to be at such a *premium*. *Now* or never, therefore, is my time to sell.'

Though he spoke of himself as the article of barter he

was well aware that Mr. Erin's thoughts were fixed upon another purchase, which, as it were, included him in the same 'lot.'

'But, my dear Samuel, this is so altogether unexpected.'

'So is the discovery of the manuscript,' put in the young fellow with pitiless logic.

'It is like springing a mine on me, my lad.'

'The "Vortigern and Rowena" is also a mine, or I hope will prove so,' was the quick rejoinder.

Whatever might be urged against William Henry Erin, it could not be said that he had not his wits about him.

'You have only the copy,' objected the antiquary, though he felt the argument to be inadequate, since it was liable to be swept away.

'Nay,' returned the young man, smiling, 'what becomes of the acumen of the critic, if internal evidence is insufficient to establish authenticity? His occupation is gone.'

This was Mr. Erin's favourite quotation from the 'Rejoinder;' to use it against him was like seething a kid in its mother's milk, and it roused him for the first time to vigorous opposition. It is possible that he also saw his opportunity for spurring the other on to gain possession of the precious document.

'That is all mighty fine, young sir, but this is not a question of sentiment. I must see this play in Shakespeare's own handwriting before I can take your most unlooked-for proposal into consideration at all. At present the whole affair is in the air.'

'You shall see the play,' said William Henry composedly.

'Moreover,' continued the antiquary with equal firmness, 'it will not be sufficient that I myself should be convinced of its authenticity. It must receive general acceptance.'

'I can hardly promise, sir, that there will no objectors.'

returned the young man drily: 'Mr. Malone, for example, will probably have something to say.'

The mention of 'that devil,' as the antiquary, in moments of irritation, was wont to call that respectable commentator, was most successful.

'I speak of rational beings, sir,' returned Mr. Erin, with quite what is called in painting his 'early manner.' 'What Malone may take into his head to think is absolutely indifferent to me. I speak of the public voice.'

'As heard, for instance, at the National Theatre,' suggested William Henry earnestly. 'Suppose that "Vortigern and Rowena" should be acted at Drury Lane or Covent Garden, and be received as the *bonâ fide* production of Shakespeare? Would that test content you?'

That such an ordeal would be of a sufficiently crucial nature was indubitable, yet not more so than the confidence with which it was proposed. If the least glimmer of doubt as to the genuineness of the Shakespearean MSS. still reigned in the antiquary's mind the voice and manner of his son as he spoke those words would have dispelled it. The immaturity of the two young people was not much altered for the better since Mr. Erin had cited it as a bar to their union, but, under the circumstances now suggested, their position would be very materially improved. A play at Drury Lane in those days meant money in pocket; a successful play was a small fortune, and might even be a large one. He would have greatly preferred to have this precious MS., like the others, for nothing; but, after all, what was demanded of him was better than being asked to give hard cash for a pig in a poke. It was only a promise to pay upon conditions which would make the payment comparatively easy.

'If "Vortigern and Rowena" is successful,' continued William Henry, with the quiet persistence of a carpenter who strikes the same nail on the head, 'it must be understood that I have permission to marry Margaret as soon as she pleases.'

Poor Mr. Erin looked appealingly at his niece. 'You

will surely not be so indelicate,' his glance seemed to say, 'as to wish to precipitate a matter of this kind?' But he looked in vain. She did not, it is true, say, 'I will, though;' there was even a blush on her cheek, which might have seemed to flatter his expectations: but she kept silence, which in such a case it was impossible to construe otherwise than as consent.

Some old gentlemen would have hereupon felt themselves justified in saying that 'young women were not so forward in their time,' or 'that such conduct was in their experience unprecedented'—a reflection, to judge by the frequency with which it is indulged in under similar circumstances, that would seem to give some sort of consolation; but the antecedents of Mr. Samuel Erin were unhappily, as we have hinted, not of a sufficiently ascetic nature to enable him to use this solace.

'Perhaps you would like to read the play?' suggested William Henry.

'Very much,' replied the antiquary with eagerness.

'Just as you please, Mr. Erin. It is yours of course, upon the understanding, supposing it to realise expectation, that we have your consent to our marriage.'

'Very good,' replied the antiquary, without any eagerness at all, and in a tone which (had such a substitution been feasible) would have better suited with 'Very bad.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLY.

All that had gone before as regarded the Shakespeare MSS. sank into almost insignificance as compared with the stir made by the 'Vortigern and Rowena.' The superiority of new lamps over old ones has, with that well-known exception in the 'Arabian Nights,' been pretty generally acknowledged in all climes and times. If a

scrap of writing from the great genius, who had left nothing of himself behind him, save, as had been hitherto supposed, a couple of signatures, had had its attractions; if the original drafts of a well-known play or two had set the town by the ears; one may imagine the excitement produced by the discovery of a brand-new drama in the master's hand. Mr. Samuel Erin's door in Norfolk Street was positively besieged by applicants to view the wonder.

That gentleman, however, declined for the present to gratify the public curiosity. Conscious as he was of the importance of his own position, he was also fully aware of the necessity of strengthening it against all comers, among whom must necessarily be many foes. William Henry had been as good as his word. He had, though with great difficulty, persuaded his patron to part with the precious manuscript, which had been duly placed in the antiquary's hands. Both by external and internal evidence he was fully satisfied with its authenticity; but it was necessary that the world without should share his conviction. Mahomet, it seems, was for a considerable time content with a single believer; nor, when we consider that that believer was his wife, is it discreditable to his claims. If he could only have converted his *valet de chambre* also, he ought to have been well satisfied. Mr. Erin, as we are aware, was in a much better position as to followers, but then he wanted so much more. Mahomet, so far as we know, had not just then a two-guinea edition of the Koran in hand, the sale of which was beginning to slacken. It was doubtful whether the immediate publication of the 'Vortigern' might not injure its predecessor, unless its genuineness could be better authenticated.

To this end, Mr. Erin took the bold step of convening a committee of commentators and critics to report upon the MS. A selection was made from those who had signed the certificate, and who were therefore favourable; but others were invited who had not so compromised themselves, and even who might be supposed to be hostile, including Mr. Albany Wallis. No one could say that it

was a hole-and-corner business, far less that the assembly was packed. It would, without doubt, have been much more agreeable to Mr. Erin if it had been, for he had to listen to some very unpleasant things. These, for the most part, it was true, were said by small men. Just as in the great railway meetings of the present day, the shareholder who has just put enough in the undertaking to qualify him to speak at all is always the most loquacious, so the second-rate critics, who had not much chance of being listened to in the world without, were, if not the most sceptical, the most vituperative; and poor Mr. Erin was not a chairman who could ignore them. The style, the matter, the caligraphy of the 'Vortigern,' nay, even the very paper on which it was written, underwent the sharpest scrutiny and evoked some very bitter remarks. Dr. Parr and Dr. Warton, the two great cards of the certificate, were strongly in favour of the play, and carried many with them, including the Laureate Pye, and his brother poet, Sir James Burgess. But there were also many adversaries.

The fact was, notwithstanding that famous dictum about the occupation of the critic being gone if the intrinsic merit of a work was not sufficient to establish its genuineness, and though the excellence of the 'Vortigern' was on the whole admitted, the story of how it came into William Henry's hands was the real obstacle to its acceptance. His patron of the Temple was too much wrapped in mystery to be satisfactory to the minds of most.

The committee was to sit for two days, and then decide by vote upon the all-important question, was there or was there not sufficient evidence before them of the authenticity of the play? William Henry was always present, a witness whose examination was always proceeding, but, as it were, in a circle. The keenest expert could get nothing out of him beyond what had been already got. He had nothing to tell, save what he had already told. His manner was cool and collected, and produced a favourable impression. Sir James Burgess said, 'If this young

man is not speaking the truth, he is a marvellous actor; and we are informed, upon authority which in this case can certainly not be disputed, that he is but seventeen.' The authority was not quite so good as Sir James imagined, but the fact was as he stated it.

Alone with Mr. Erin and Margaret, the young fellow was even more self-reliant; he was hopeful. Whatever decision the committee might arrive at, there was still, he would say, the appeal to the public; and in that he expressed his confidence. In this Mr. Erin could not agree; if the play was discredited by those who had been so solemnly convened to judge of it, he doubted of its acceptance out of doors. On the second and all-important day there was even a fuller attendance than on the first. Among the new-comers was the Bishop of St. Andrews, a good-natured divine enough, but who produced an unfavourable impression by quoting Porson's 'Iambics,' 'Three children sliding on the ice,' which the great professor pretended to have found in an old trunk among some manuscript plays of Sophocles—an obvious satire upon the Shakespearean discoveries. Greek wit is never so mirth-provoking as to endanger life, but at this specimen it was difficult for Mr. Samuel Erin to force a smile. What even more depressed him was the unexpected arrival of Mr. Reginald Talbot. How this young man had gained admittance he could not understand; but at such a time the real ground of objection to him could not, of course, be stated. Public opinion had been challenged, and on the brink of its decision it would have been madness indeed to have any altercation with one who had evinced his scepticism.

Talbot had come in alone and taken his seat rather apart from the rest; his face looked less florid than usual, but resolute enough; after one glance round the room he fixed his eyes upon the ground. Every moment the antiquary expected to hear his blatant voice giving utterance to some offensive imputation; but he remained silent, listening to the pros and cons. of his seniors, with no particular interest, as it seemed, in the matter.

William Henry had seen him enter, of course—there were few things that escaped his observation—but had shown no sign of concern, far less of apprehension. He either did not fear him, or had screwed his courage to the sticking place. Now and then, indeed, he glanced nervously at the door; but from no fear of an enemy. He had some misgiving lest Margaret's anxiety upon his account might compel her to come and hear for herself how matters were going on; a very groundless apprehension, for nothing could have been more foreign to her retiring and modest nature than to have intruded herself upon such an assembly.

After all who wished to speak had had their say, the Laureate rose and addressed the meeting. He had listened very attentively, he said, to the opinions that had been advanced on both sides upon the subject of controversy; and if he could not say that he had himself come to a definite conclusion, he thought that he had at least gathered the general view of those present. The play before them was undoubtedly a remarkable one; he could not take upon himself to say from internal evidence whether it was, or was not, written by William Shakespeare, but, on the whole, he believed it to have been so. Persons better qualified than himself to judge of such matters had expressed themselves for and against the other proofs of its authenticity. Again, on the whole, these seemed to him to be in its favour. But what, after all, was their great stumblingblock was the mystery—and as it seemed to him the unnecessary mystery—that hung about its discovery.

Here there were audible expressions of assent. Mr. Erin, pale and trembling, but much more with anger than with fear, was about to rise, but the Laureate waved him back. He was not going to have his peroration spoilt by any man. There was a general murmur of 'Pye, Pye,' which under any other circumstances, would have sounded exquisitely humorous; it was like a bread riot of the *upper classes.* 'Under these circumstances,' continued

the orator, 'if anyone can be found who has seen the MS. as it were *in situ*, and has met the unknown patron of the Temple in the flesh, so as to corroborate so far the testimony of this young gentleman' (here he pointed to William Henry), 'I, for one, shall have no hesitation in acknowledging myself a believer; but in the absence of such a witness I must take leave, at least, to reserve my judgment.'

There was a long and significant silence. If the speaker had not expressed the views of the majority, he had done so for many of those present; while the want of corroborative testimony, such as he had indicated, was felt by all. Even Mr. Erin, perhaps for the first time, understood how evidence which had been, and was, perfectly conclusive to himself, might well fail, thus unsupported, to satisfy the public mind. He felt like the young blood who had recently been endeavouring for a bet to dispose within five minutes of a hundred sovereigns to as many persons on London Bridge for a penny apiece. His MSS. were genuine, but if he could not persuade people to believe it, where would be his profit?

'Well,' continued the Laureate in self-satisfied tones, for he was pleased with the impression his eloquence had produced, and especially that he had reduced the antiquary—in whose mind he had created a desert and called it peace—to silence: 'well! the question is, Is there such a witness as I have described?'

'Yes, there is.'

These words fell upon the general ear like a bombshell, but no one was more utterly astounded by them than Mr. Samuel Erin himself. He could hardly believe his ears, and when he looked to the quarter from which they proceeded—and to which everyone else was looking—he could not believe his eyes; for the man that had uttered them was Mr. Reginald Talbot.

The young man was not, indeed, in appearance quite the sort of witness whom one would have chosen to establish the authenticity of an ancient literary document; though

at a police court, in some case of assault (provided the victim was respectable, and he had been for the prosecution), he might have been passable enough. His dress was that of a young man of fashion, but not of good fashion; his manner was suggestive less of confidence than of swagger, and his face spoke of indulgence in liquor. On the other hand, this impression may have been partly caused by his contrast with these learned pundits, most of them in wigs, and some of them in shovel hats; he scarcely seemed to belong to the same race. The very eye-glass, which headed the cane he carried so jauntily in his hand, was out of keeping with *their* eye-glasses, and looked like some gay young lens who had refused to be put into spectacles, and was winking at life on its own hook.

'Does anyone know this young gentleman?' inquired Mr. Pye, with significant hesitation.

'Yes, I know him,' observed Mr. Albany Wallis. 'I have, it is true, but slight acquaintance with his personal character, but he comes of respectable parentage.'

'You may add that he has two hundred a year of his own, good money,' observed Mr. Talbot with some complacency, and a strong Irish accent.

Mr. Pye looked at him very dubiously, and in spite of this assurance of his financial solvency, addressed himself to the previous speaker.

'In the case before us, Mr. Wallis—and I need not say how your opinion will weigh with us,—do you consider this gentleman as a dependable witness?'

Mr. Reginald Talbot turned very red, and, not having a retort on hand suitable to bestow on a Poet Laureate, very wisely held his tongue.

'I am bound to say,' said Mr. Wallis gravely, 'that Mr. Talbot has given some attention to the authenticity of the Shakespeare MSS., and up to this time he has expressed himself, and with somewhat unnecessary vehemence, to their discredit; any evidence he may therefore have to offer in their favour will have some weight with me.'

Then all the company awaited in expectant silence for Mr. Reginald Talbot's narrative.

'What Mr. Wallis has said is quite right,' said that young gentleman, with unnecessary affability. 'I did use to think that there was something amiss with those Shakespeare papers. I had an idea that Mr. William Henry Erin yonder was playing tricks, so I made it my business to watch him. I hung about his chambers in the New Inn—they are on the ground-floor, though pretty high up—and with a short ladder I have made shift to see what was going on when he was alone in his room, and little suspected it.'

William Henry, standing apart with folded arms, listened to this confession of his former friend with a contemptuous smile. If it was a revelation to him, he displayed the indifference of a North American Indian.

'For days and days I watched him and discovered nothing. Then I dogged his steps to the city, where he went every afternoon; on two occasons he turned, as if to see whether he was followed, and I think he saw me.'

William Henry shook his head.

'Well, at all events I thought he did, and gave it up. The third time, walking on the other side of the street, and very careful to leave a safe distance between us, I tracked him to a staircase in the Temple. He stopped at a door on the first floor, and entered without knocking. I waited a bit and then followed him. An old gentleman was seated in the room alone, in an arm-chair, reading; he looked up from his book in great astonishment, and inquired very curtly who I was.

'I said that I came upon business of importance, after young Mr. Erin. He rose, and opening an inner door, exclaimed, "Here is a friend of yours, sir: what is the meaning of his intrusion here?" He spoke very angrily, but I felt that he had some reason for it, and when Erin came out and said, "Talbot, you have ruined me," I felt sorry for what I had done. There was nothing for it but to make a clean breast of it, and with many apologies, of

which not the slightest notice was taken, I explained that curiosity, and a suspicion that the world was being gulled by these pretended discoveries, had induced me to look into the matter myself.

'"You are a spy, then," cried the old gentleman. I thought for a moment that he was going to throw me out of the window; but his rage instantly subsided. "Take him into the next room, Erin, and show him all," he said. He took me accordingly, and there I saw an immense quantity of old manuscripts strewed about the floor; I should say whole cartfuls of them. I was so sorry and so ashamed of myself that I never spoke a word till Erin let me out again.

'"I am sorry I came," I said; "but I am quite satisfied, sir, that Erin spoke the truth."

'"I don't care a farthing, sir, whether you are satisfied or not," replied the old gentleman; "you have taken a mean advantage of your friend, and an unpardonable liberty with me."

'Then I told him upon my honour, and as I hoped to be saved, that I would never reveal his name to any human being.

'He waved his hand contemptuously, and observed that my word and my oath together were not worth sixpence; but if I had any feeling for my friend, or any remorse for the baseness I had committed, I had better hold my tongue, since, if by my means his secret should be discovered, Erin should never darken his doors again, nor receive from him any of the benefits which it had been his intention to confer upon him. Erin himself did not speak to me at all; he has never spoken to me from that day to this; but hearing by accident of this meeting, I resolved to come here, and do what I could for him by way of reparation. That is all I have got to say.'

This narrative made an immense impression. Mr. Samuel Erin sighed a great sigh of relief, and looked around him with triumphant exultation. He had not *needed any* confirmation of his son's story for himself, but

he felt how opportune with respect to others was this young man's testimony—that in him, in fact, he had entertained an angel very much unawares. A murmur of satisfaction ran round the company, and the faces of even the most sceptical relaxed their severity. William Henry alone looked totally unmoved, like one who had all along been conscious that his character would be cleared, one way or another, and was indifferent in what way. Some questions were put to Talbot, but nothing was elicited to shake his evidence; indeed, since he had by his own showing taken his oath that he would not reveal the name of the Templar unknown, there was little more to be extracted from him.

The Laureate, in a short but dignified speech, observed that after the very testimony he had stated was the only thing wanting to his conviction had been forthcoming, he could not, in reason, offer any further objection to the authenticity of the play, and that for his part he admitted it.

To this the whole company, with hardly a dissentient voice, expressed their agreement, and the committee dispersed, after passing an all but unanimous resolution that the 'Vortigern and Rowena' was a genuine play of William Shakespeare's.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MANAGERS.

The last two days had been very trying ones for the little household in Norfolk Street, and, though success had crowned their hopes, they bore marks of the struggle that evening. Even young William Henry, who, like the antiquarian Duchess (but with a difference), seemed to have been born before nerves had come into fashion, showed signs of the terrible ordeal through which he had passed, he was tender-footed after the red-hot ploughshares.

The antiquary himself was almost in a state of collapse; while Margaret, as sensible and self-contained a girl as was to be found on either side of the Thames, between gratitude to Heaven and love to man, became for the first time in her life hysterical. All was well for her Willie at last, but she doubted, and with reason, whether, exposed to the brunt of the battle, and fighting for what was dearer to him than life itself, his honour, he had suffered as much as she had done, sitting in her little room apart from the *mêlée* and picturing to herself the terrors of defeat.

She listened to their narrative of the proceedings with a fearful joy, deemed at first Mr. Pye the basest, and presently the best of men, and felt a secret gratitude to Mr. Albany Wallis that she would have found it difficult to explain: she had an impression that he was not their ally, but that a strong sense of justice, mingled perhaps with remorse for the part he had on a former occasion taken against them, had made him something more than neutral. Remorse, too, she herself felt as regarded the person to whom the final triumph was after all mainly owing.

'Where is Mr. Talbot, Willie?' she said excitedly. 'I should like to tell him, not only how much indebted I am to him, but how wrong was the judgment I had previously formed of him.'

'To be sure,' observed the antiquary naïvely; 'where *is* Talbot?' When the city has been preserved, as the Scripture says, nobody remembers the name of the obscure individual who saved it, and in the glow of victory Mr. Erin had clean forgotten his young Irish ally. 'I suppose his modesty prevented him from waiting to receive our acknowledgments.'

'No doubt it was his modesty,' said William Henry drily. 'But as for your gratitude, Maggie, I think it is somewhat misplaced; if he has now done us good, he once did his best to do us harm, and thus far we are only quits.'

'*That* was a dirty trick his following Samuel to the

Temple,' observed Mr. Erin; 'though, as it happened, it has turned out to our advantage.'

'Still, it is not everyone who is ready to make reparation for an error,' said Margaret gravely.

To this there was no reply from her uncle. Margaret hardly expected any. He was a man who took the gifts which Heaven vouchsafed him without any excess of fervour; but from Willie she had looked for more generosity of spirit; on the other hand, he might be a little jealous (she had a vague impression that the young Irish gentleman had made some clumsy attempt in confederation with his eye-glass to recommend himself to her attention), in which case of course Willie was forgiven.

'At all events,' she continued, smiling, for this idea amused her, 'I shall not be considered forward if I thank Mr. Talbot on my own account when he next pays us a visit.'

'I shall not have the least objection,' returned William Henry in the same light tone—though his taking it upon himself to say so was significant enough of his confidence in his position—'but I am afraid you will not have an early opportunity of relieving your mind of its weight of gratitude. Talbot goes home to-morrow by the Irish packet.'

'Then you saw him after all, before he left this afternoon,' cried Margaret. 'Why, I understood that he had fled to avoid your thanks.'

'That was my father's view,' said William Henry, 'and such a touching one that I had not the heart to combat it; but as a matter of fact I did see Talbot for one moment, and of course I thanked him.'

'Oh! Willie, Willie, why will you always make yourself out worse than you are?' exclaimed Margaret reproachfully.

'I think we had better say nothing about it,' observed the antiquary thoughtfully. Margaret looked up rather sharply at him; she thought his words had reference to William Henry's modest concealment of his own virtues,

and that he was disputing the fact; but, strange to say, though that estimable young man was before his eyes, Mr. Erin was not thinking of him at all. 'We will leave others to say what they like,' continued he, 'and fight it out among themselves. In twenty-four hours the whole town will be talking of nothing else.'

'You mean about the play, sir?' suggested William Henry.

'Well, of course; what the devil else should I mean?' returned the antiquary with irritation. It was disgusting that these two young people—for his niece looked as much at sea as his son—should be so wrapped up in one another and their commonplace affairs as to have forgotten 'Vortigern and Rowena' already. 'I think it will be better to rest on our oars and wait events.'

'Shut our eyes and open our mouths,' said William Henry, 'and see what Heaven will send us.'

The remark was flippant, but the sense of it was in accordance with Mr. Erin's views. In his exaltation of spirit he even condescended to reply in the same vein.

'I shall open my mouth pretty wide, I can tell you, when the managers come; but we must not go to them.'

'You of course know best,' said William Henry modestly. If left to himself the impetuosity of youth would have led him on the morrow, cap (and MS.) in hand, to the stage door of the nearest theatre.

'Fortunately, you see, we can afford to wait,' said Mr. Erin composedly.

William Henry glanced at Margaret, and Margaret dropped her eyes: Mr. Erin's sentiments, though intended to be comforting, and even exultant, were, strange to say, not shared by these young people.

They had not, however, to wait long. As Mr. Erin had predicted, the news that the committee appointed to investigate the claims of the 'Vortigern' MS. had decided in its favour flew swiftly over the town. 'From the palace to the cottage,' said Mr. Erin in his enthusiasm, though *probably it* only reached the cottage orné. Letters of

congratulation poured in from every quarter. Even Malone was reported to have said that if it could have been done *incognito* he should have liked to see the manuscript. (What he really said was, 'I wish that Steevens had found it,' meaning that he should have taken a real pleasure in eviscerating *him*.) The opinion of antiquaries was divided; and if Reid and Ritson denounced the play, Garter-King-at-Arms was enthusiastic in its favour, and gave it more supporters than Heraldry ever dreamt of.

Before a week was over came Mr. Harris, proprietor of Covent Garden Theatre, to Norfolk Street in person. The announcement of his name set William Henry's heart beating more quickly than it had done even on that fateful afternoon in Anne Hathaway's garden. For the first time he shrank from the customary ordeal of investigation, and Mr. Erin interviewed the manager alone. As it happened, the young man need have been under no apprehension of a browbeating. Mr. Harris was a practical man, of an expansive mind, which did not stoop to details.

'The committee, I hear, sir, have decided in favour of this play of yours,' was his first remark; it was delivered with quite unnecessary abruptness, but it was not the tone alone which grated upon Mr. Erin's ears.

'This play of mine, as you have thought proper to term it, Mr. Harris,' he replied with dignity, 'is Shakespeare's play.'

'So you say, and, indeed, so many other people say, or I should not be here,' was the cool rejoinder. 'Between ourselves, Mr. Erin, and speaking as one man of the world to another, I don't care a farthing—certainly not a Queen Anne's farthing—whether it is Shakespeare's play or not. The question that concerns *me* is, "Do the public believe it to be such?"'

'Am I to understand, then, that you do not wish to examine the MS.?'

'Examine it? Certainly not. My time is very much occupied—it is in five acts, is it not?'

'It is in five acts,' assented the antiquary; he could

hardly trust hmself to reply, except in the other's words. Mr. Harris's indifference, notwithstanding that it promised to facilitate matters, was most offensive to him. 'Mr. Pye has been so good as to promise us a prologue for the play.'

'That's good; "Prologue by the Poet Laureate" will look well in the bill. We must have an epilogue ready, even though'—here he smiled grimly—'we never get so far as that.'

The suggestion of such a contingency—which, of course, meant total failure—in cold blood, filled up the cup of the antiquary's indignation. He almost resolved, whatever this man offered, to decline his proposition to bring out the play.

'Mr. Merry will write the epilogue,' he replied icily.

'A very good man—for an epilogue,' replied the manager drily. 'Well, we must strike while the iron's hot, or not at all. We must not give the public time to flag in its enthusiasm, or, what will be worse, perhaps, to alter its opinion. There is risk of this even now, but I am ready to run it, and I'll take the play.'

'The devil you will!' said Mr. Erin.

'Yes, I will,' continued the manager calmly, taking, or pretending to take, this explosion of his companion as an expression of admiration of his own courage; 'it will cost a good bit of money, but I'll take it and never charge you a farthing for placing it on the boards. It's an offer you are not likely to get again, I promise you.'

'I'll take your word for that,' said the antiquary quietly; he had passed the glowing stage of indignation, into that white heat which looks almost like coolness. 'I don't think any other human being would venture to make so audacious a proposal. Have you really the impudence to ask me to give you a play of Shakespeare's for nothing?'

'For nothing? What, do you call the advertisement nothing? How is an author's name established? How *does he acquire* fame and fortune but through the oppor-

tunity of becoming known? And how could he get a better one than having his play acted at Covent Garden?'

'I was not aware that Shakespeare stood in need of an advertisement, Mr. Harris,' returned the antiquary grimly. 'And even supposing that, thanks to you, he becomes popular, he is not a rising young author; should "Vortigern and Rowena" be ever so successful, that would not enable us to find another of his plays.'

'It would be a great encouragement to do it,' answered the manager impudently. 'However, there's my offer!'

'And there's my door, Mr. Harris.' And Mr. Erin pointed to it with unmistakable significance.

'Stuff and nonsense!' said the manager. 'What do you want? How do you suppose plays are brought out, man? Come, what do you say to half profits?'

'No!'

'Then look here—now that is your last chance, as I'm a Christian man.'

'Then I shall have another,' said Mr. Erin. It was the first approach to an epigram he had ever made in his life. Anger is a short madness, genius is a kind of madness, and so, perhaps, it came about that fury suggested to him that lively sally.

'A hundred pounds down, and half profits: that is my last word,' cried the manager.

'No!' thundered the antiquary. He was still upon his legs, with his outstretched arm pointing to the door like a finger-post.

The manager walked into the passage, opened the front door, and held it in his hand.

'A hundred and fifty, and half profits.'

'No.'

'Very good; more than a hundred and fifty pounds for the play of a Shakespeare who spells *and* with a final *e* I will not give.'

The door closed behind him with a great bang, which sounded, however, less like a thunder-clap to Mr. Erin than that concluding sarcasm. He was not aware that a

pamphlet had been published that very morning, which pointed out that the spelling of *and* with an *e*, a practice pursued throughout the 'Vortigern,' had been utterly unknown, not only to Elizabethan times, but to any other.

When Mr. Erin rejoined his two young people, who were waiting for him with no little anxiety in the next room, there was no need to ask his news. His face told it.

Nevertheless, Margaret said, 'Well, uncle?' before she could stop herself.

'It is not well,' he answered passionately; 'it is devilish bad.'

'But surely Mr. Harris was not uncivil?'

'Uncivil? Who wants his civility? Who but a fool would expect it in a theatrical manager? Bring me the play—the "Vortigern."'

'What is the matter now?' inquired William Henry.

His manner, as usual, was imperturbable. Mr. Erin—so great was the revolution wrought in him by recent circumstances—seemed at once to derive comfort from it. 'Well, it's very unfortunate, but it seems that an objection has been discovered—insignificant in itself, but which seriously affects its genuineness.'

'Indeed? There have been a good many not insignificant objections—and yet it has been generally accepted,' said the young man, smiling.

'It's nothing to smile at, I do assure you, if what that fellow said is correct.'

He had the manuscript before him, and was examining it with nervous eagerness through his glasses. 'Yes, here's one, and here's another *and* with an *e*. Why should Shakespeare spell *and* with an *e*?'

He looked up sharply at his son, as if asking a riddle of one who has the answer to it.

'I am sure I don't know, sir,' replied William Henry quietly. 'He spelt things very much as he pleased.'

'That's true, that's true. But just now it's certainly most disappointing that there should be any hitch. The *very stars in their* courses seem to fight against us.'

'It is an unfortunate conjunction, that is all,' said the young man, smiling again. 'The objection of which Mr. Harris speaks may be new, but not the spelling: *and* was so spelt in the Profession of Faith, for example.'

'Indeed! That had escaped my recollection. Come, that is satisfactory. All those, then, who signed the certificate will be with us. It was foolish of me to be so discouraged.'

'And did Mr. Harris decline the play on the ground of *and* being written with the final *e*?'

'Well, no, he didn't decline it.'

'He only used that argument, perhaps, in order to get it at a cheap rate?' suggested William Henry.

This, as we know, had not been the case; he had pretty broadly hinted that he did not believe it to be Shakespeare's play at all, and even that there might be plenty more where the 'Vortigern' came from; but so bound up in these wondrous discoveries had Mr. Erin's mind become, that it was distressing and humiliating to have to confess as much, even to his son and niece.

'Why, yes; he wanted it cheap, and therefore of course depreciated it. He only offered one hundred and fifty pounds for it and half profits.'

William Henry looked up amazed. For the first time his self-control deserted him. In his heart he thought the antiquary a fool for having refused such terms; but it was not the rejection of the terms that annoyed him so much as the rejection of the chance of having the play produced at a theatre like Covent Garden. His feelings, in fact, were precisely the same as those on which Mr. Harris had counted—without his host.

'The money in hand may be small, sir, but the half profits—in case the play were successful—as I feel it must have been, might have been well worth having.'

Mr. Erin began to think so too by this time. After all, what did it matter whether the manager were a believer in the play or not, had his theatre been only made the channel of its introduction to the public? He sat in

moody silence, thinking whether it would be possible, after what had passed, 'to win that tassel gentle,' Mr. Harris, 'back again.' It was certain that he (Mr. Erin) would have to swallow a very large leek first.

The servant-girl entered, bringing a slip of paper upon a salver, the name, no doubt, of one of those thousand and one persons who were now always coming to ask permission to see the MS.

'Two gentlemen to see you, sir,' said the maid.

The antiquary glanced at the name, and then, as high as a gentleman of sixty *can* leap, he leaped from his chair.

Margaret, thinking her uncle had been seized with some malady—presumably 'the jumps'—uttered a little scream of terror.

'Good heavens! what is it?'

'Sheridan!' he cried triumphantly. 'There are more fish in the sea, Samuel, than have come out of it, and better ones; see, lad, it's in his own handwriting; he is here in person—"Richard Brinsley Sheridan, favoured by Dr. Parr."'

CHAPTER XXV.

TWO DISTINGUISHED VISITORS.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan—

> The pride of the palace, the bower, and the hall,
> The orator, dramatist, minstrel who ran
> Through each mode of the lyre and was master of all—

was a very great man in those days in many ways; but what made him just now of especial importance to Mr. Samuel Erin was that he was the manager of Drury Lane Theatre.

That Mr. Harris, of Covent Garden, should have snapped at the 'Vortigern' bait had been a satisfactory circumstance enough (though indeed he had only 'sucked it' and got off the hook), but the coming of Sheridan was

quite another matter. Compared with him, all other managers were small fry.

It was with a less assured demeanour, therefore, than usual, and with an expectancy somewhat tempered with awe, that Mr. Samuel Erin repaired to the parlour. Even the MS. in his hand had lost some of its virtue in view of the authority who was about to pronounce upon it: it was almost as if he had been a young author with his own play; a work of immense original genius, but which he was about to submit for the first time to a leading publisher. It was some relief to him to feel that Dr. Parr would be present, who was well known to him, and a believer in the Shakespearean manuscripts.

As he entered the room the great man came forward to shake him frankly by the hand. His manner was more than gracious, it was genial, and seemed to put him at his ease in a moment. His appearance was not imposing—a man of forty-five inclined to corpulency, with a loose-fitting coat secured by one button over the chest, and a carelessly knotted white neckcloth—he wore his own hair, already very grey, tied behind with a black riband. His face was puffy, and evinced signs of what was even then called 'free living.' What redeemed it, however, and invested the whole man with marvellous attraction, were his bright and sparkling eyes, which glittered with merriment and good humour. The antiquary was so fascinated with them that for the moment he took no notice of the other person in the room, till Sheridan called his attention to him.

'You have doubtless seen our friend here pretty often before, Mr. Erin?' he said, smiling.

The antiquary turned round and held out his hand mechanically. The other, however, instead of taking it, drew himself up to his full height (which was a good way), put his hands behind him, and bowed stiffly: it was not Dr. Parr, but John Kemble.

Mr. Erin, as a playgoer, had of course seen him 'pretty often before,' but generally in royal robes or in armour,

attired as a king or a warrior; as it happened he had never before seen him in plain clothes. He had a noble figure and a handsome face—though, strange to say, not a very mobile one—and, so far, was in strong contrast to his companion; the difference in expression was even greater. Mr. Kemble had a sternness of demeanour that was almost forbidding, and which reminded Mr. Erin on the instant that he was an intimate friend of Malone's.

'I did not expect the honour of a visit from Mr. Kemble,' said the antiquary drily.

'I did not come, sir, of my own free will,' was the uncompromising reply, delivered in deep tragic tones. 'I am here at the request of my friend Mr. Sheridan.'

'Quite true,' observed that gentleman, his eyes dancing with laughter at the antagonistic attitude of his two companions, the tragedian like a stately St. Bernard with stiff tail, who resents the attention of some half-breed of no insignificant stature, and that ventures to entertain a very tolerable opinion of itself.

'I dragged him here, Mr. Erin, like iniquity, with cart-ropes. The quarrels of commentators, I know, are like the bars of a castle; they'll be shot rather than open their arms to one another. For my sake, however, I hope you will, both of you, make a truce while this little matter of business is under discussion; then to it again hammer and tongs with all my heart. Now, where's this play?'

Mr. Erin produced it from his breast pocket, into which he had hurriedly thrust it.

'Oh, that's it, is it? 'Gad! he carries it about with him as a mother carries a new-born babe, whose paternity has never been questioned.'

Kemble smiled, as Coriolanus might have done at the mention of gratitude.

'I think, Mr. Sheridan,' said the antiquary in an offended tone, 'if you will be so good as to glance at yonder certificate, including among other authorities your friend Dr. Parr, you must admit that the legitimacy of "*Vortigern and Rowena*" is tolerably well established. Herbert

Croft, Dr. Walton, the Poet Laureate, Sir James Bland Burgess, are vouchers——'

'Weighty enough, indeed,' interposed the manager impatiently; 'anything ought to go down with such names attached to it. But the play, the play's the thing. Let's look at it.'

It was a detail, if report spoke true, that Sheridan did not always insist upon. He had offered to accept a comedy from the authoress of 'Evelina' unread, and to put it on the boards of Drury Lane. Even now, when the manuscript was spread out before him, he seemed to shrink from the task he had imposed upon himself.

''Gad!' he exclaimed, 'there seems a good lot of it!'

'There are two thousand eight hundred lines in all,' explained Mr. Erin gravely.

'Fourteen hundred lines are deemed sufficient for an acting drama,' observed Mr. Kemble acidly.

'The dramas of William Shakespeare, sir, with which I happen to have some acquaintance,' returned the antiquary with bitter significance, 'extend in more than one case to a greater length than the "Vortigern."'

'Come, come, Kemble,' said the manager good-naturedly, 'surplusage is no error, and one can hardly complain because one gets two plays for the price of one. Now, Mr. Erin, would you prefer to be present at our investigation or not? Mothers generally shrink from an inquest upon even a foster-child, but there have been Roman matrons——'

'I make it an invariable rule, Mr. Sheridan,' put in the antiquary hastily, 'though on the present occasion there is no ground, of course, for its being put in practice, never to permit the literary offspring of which you speak to leave my hands.'

'Afraid of body-snatching, eh? Think of you and me wanting to steal a play, Kemble! Why, Drury Lane is a perfect foundling hospital for them. However, just as you please, sir.'

Then, while Mr. Erin sat apart affecting to be immersed

in a folio (but with his ears wide open), the two sat down to the manuscript, from which Kemble now and then read aloud in deep sonorous tones, which were not always so sarcastic as he intended them to be.

There was a certain rhythmical roll in many lines like the thunder of the surf, and also (as in its case) a head of foam which gave the impression of strength. For example :—

> Full fifty breathless bodies struck my sight ;
> And some with gaping mouths did seem to mock me ;
> Whilst others, smiling in cold death itself,
> Scoffingly bade me look on that which soon
> Would wrench from off my brow this sacred crown,
> And make me too a subject like themselves.

From Kemble's mouth at least such lines were not wanting in majestic vigour, though he lent it to them involuntarily. It was evident enough, indeed, that he was adverse to the acceptance of the play, while Sheridan was in favour of it. What doubtless furthered Mr. Erin's hopes was that Sheridan had notoriously no very high opinion of Shakespeare himself; he thought his genius exaggerated. Presently Kemble came to the three best lines in the tragedy—

> Give me a sword,
> I have so clogged and badged this with blood
> And slippery gore, that it doth mock my grasp ;
> A sword, I say !

—a speech he delivered with fine emphasis.

'Come, that is better than "Titus Andronicus," anyway,' said Sheridan slily.

'An echo, sir, a mere echo of "Richard the Third,"' growled the tragedian.

'Let us hope it will answer with "Richard the Fourth,"' was the laughing rejoinder.

Their disagreement was like the conflict between the whale and a sword-fish, and could have but the same end.

'I don't mean to say that some things here are not better *than others*,' said Kemble doggedly, 'though per-

haps I may be permitted to add that you hear them to the best advantage; but to me the whole thing has a false ring.'

'Perhaps it's my want of ear,' returned the manager; 'but do you think, Mr. Kemble'—here he sank his voice to a whisper,—'that many people *have* good ears?'

The drollery and even roguishness of his face as he hazarded this inquiry was indescribable. The tragedian 'put the question by,' and pursued his argument.

'Whatever you think of Shakespeare, Mr. Sheridan, you must allow that he at least always wrote poetry. Now, much of what I have had the honour to read to you is not poetry.'

'But let us suppose Shakespeare was drunk.'

'Sir!' exclaimed the tragedian in an offended tone.

'Sir!' echoed the antiquary, dropping the folio with a crash.

'Good heavens! gentlemen, may not one even put a postulate? Even Euclid, a writer of little imagination, permits that much. It is not such a very impossible supposition. Have you never heard of a man of genius with a turn for the bottle?'

As he looked very hard at the tragedian, that gentleman felt called upon to reply. 'I have no personal experience of anything of that kind,' he said loftily.

'Well, of course not; how should you?' returned Sheridan blandly, but with a curve of the lip that seemed to say, 'We are talking of men of genius.' Perhaps his reference to his own weakness made him bitter. If it was so, the feeling was very transitory; it was with his most winning smile that he presently addressed his friend, 'Come, Prester John, we can do nothing without you in this affair; surely you will not fail us.'

'I will have no responsibility in the matter,' was the haughty reply. 'I will not append my name to yonder list; I will not have it go forth to the world that I admit *the genuineness* of this production; I will not stamp it *with my* warranty; I will not——'

'Tut, tut, man!' broke in the manager impatiently; 'but you'll act, you'll act.'

'Well, yes, I will play Vortigern.'

'And Mrs. Siddons will play Edmunda?'

'Nay, sir, that is a question for herself. I cannot answer for Sarah; she always takes her own way.'

'To hear you talk one would think she was your wife instead of your sister,' said the manager, laughing. 'Then the Country Girl' (so Mrs. Jordan was called from her first success, which had been made in that piece) 'shall be Flavia, who has to appear in man's clothes; she loves to wear the breeches, as the poor Duke has long discovered. Well, we'll take your friend Shakespeare's play, Mr. Erin.' And the manager rose from his chair with a yawn, like one who has concluded a distasteful business.

'But, ahem! nothing has been said about terms,' suggested the antiquary.

'Terms? Does he mean money?' said the manager, looking towards the tragedian with an air of extreme astonishment, as though he would say, 'Can I believe my ears?'

'I am almost inclined to believe he does,' replied the other, smiling for the first time.

'But surely not money down; not ready money, he can't mean that.'

The antiquary's face unmistakably implied that he did.

'Good heavens, Mr. Erin! who *has* any ready money? I was just talking of the Duke of Clarence, has *he* any ready money? Not a guinea—though you should threaten to drown him, like his namesake, in a butt of malmsey—to save his life.'

'The money might be paid out of the profits of the first night, and then half profits,' suggested Mr. Erin.

'Mere details—business,' cried the manager disdainfully. 'You must see Albany Wallis about all that. That's a pretty face,' he added, stopping abruptly beneath a picture on the wall and pointing to it—'a charming face.'

'It is the portrait of my niece, Margaret.'

'Ay, ay; love, faith, a pure soul in a fair body; a true heart, I am sure of it.'

His voice, freighted with genuine feeling, seemed to melt away in music.

'She is in truth a good girl, Mr. Sheridan; the light of my poor house.'

'Take care of her, sir; be kind to her, lest, when it is too late, you rue it.'

He was gone in a flash, and the door closed behind him.

Mr. Erin looked at the tragedian in amazement.

'Some likeness to his late wife, I fancy,' observed that gentleman in grave explanation. 'Her death was a matter of much regret to him.' He seemed to be about to hold out his hand, but something restrained him; his eye had lit by chance on the certificate. 'Good morning, Mr. Erin,' he said, with a stiff bow.

'Good morning, Mr. Kemble.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO ACTRESSES.

The arrangements made between Mr. Samuel Erin, on behalf of his son William Henry, 'an infant,' with Mr. Albany Wallis, for the production of the play were eminently satisfactory. Mr. Erin was to receive three hundred pounds on the morning after the first night of representation, and half profits for the next sixty nights. Shakespeare himself had probably never made so good a bargain.

The news of the acceptance of the 'Vortigern' by the management of Drury Lane Theatre immensely increased the public excitement concerning it. In those days 'Old Drury' (though, indeed, it was then far from old) was the

national theatre; and the fact of a play being played upon its boards (independently of Sheridan having chosen it) gave it a certain imprimatur. It was not unreasonable, therefore, in William Henry that he already saw himself halfway to fortune, while his success in love might be said to be assured: there are but few of us in truth who, at his age, are in a position so enviable. For as, when we grow old, prosperity, if it does come, comes but too often too late for its enjoyment, so the sunshine of youth is marred by the uncertainty of its duration, and by the clouds that overhang its future. Of the reception of the 'Vortigern' the young fellow had but little doubt; he believed it would run a long and successful course, as most people do believe in the case of the hare of their own finding. And yet the manifestation of his joy was by no means extravagant. The gravity and coolness of his demeanour, which had characterised him throughout the discoveries, did not now desert him. At times, indeed, even when Margaret's arms were about his neck, he looked anxious and distrait; but when she rallied him about it he had always an explanation, natural enough and not unwelcome to her.

'I feel,' he said, 'as you once told me you felt in looking at that fair scene near Stratford, that it seemed almost too beautiful to be real, and that you had a vague fear that it would all melt. When I look on you, dear, I feel the same: such happiness is far too high for me; I have not deserved it, and I fear lest it should never be mine.'

'But you *have* deserved it, Willie,' she would lovingly reply. 'Not even my uncle questions that. He spoke of you in the highest terms, he told me, to the Regent himself.'

For Mr. Erin had been sent for to Carlton House, and had shown the precious Shakespearean manuscripts to the future ruler of the realm, who had expressed himself as 'greatly interested.' He had been [illegible] *resist the weight* of evidence whi[illegible]

favour of their authenticity, and had especially admired the 'Vortigern.' The old man's head was almost turned with the royal praises; and it was not to be wondered at that he had expressed his satisfaction with the youth by whose means he had been introduced into so serene an atmosphere.

'I do not think I am without desert, Madge, though there was a time when you used to think so [an allusion, of course, to her old scepticism as to his genius]; but I do not deserve *you*,' was William Henry's grave reply.

A modest rejoinder, which, we may be sure, secured its reward.

Margaret thought that there never had been, and never would be, so deserving a youth as her Willie, or one who, having received his deserts, bore his honours so unassumingly.

Nevertheless—for, in spite of the proverb, 'It never rains but it pours,' good fortune seldom befalls us mortals without alloy—there were drops of bitterness in his full cup. The Poet Laureate Pye had been reminded of his promise to write a prologue for the 'Vortigern,' and had performed it, but by no means in a satisfactory manner.

It had come to them one morning at breakfast, and had been received with rapture by Mr. Erin—till he came to read it. It commenced as follows:—

> If in our scenes your eyes, delighted, find
> Marks that denote the mighty master's mind;
> If at his words the tears of pity flow,
> Your hearts with horror fill, with rapture glow,
> Demand no other proof;
> But if these proofs should fail, if in the strain
> Ye seek the drama's awful sire in vain,
> Should critics, heralds, antiquaries, join
> To give their fiat to each doubtful line,
> Believe them *not*.

'Curse the fellow!' cried the antiquary, throwing down the manuscript in disgust; 'why, this is worse than *useless*. What the devil does he mean by his "ifs" and "*nots*"?'

'I fancy Mr. Malone could tell us,' observed William Henry quietly.

'No doubt, lad, no doubt,' said Mr. Erin, eagerly catching at this solution of the Laureate's change of front. That man would drop his poison into the ear of an archangel. Not that Pye is an archangel, nor anything like it.'

'Archangels must write very indifferent poetry if he is,' remarked William Henry, smiling.

'Just so—a deuced bad poet!' rejoined Mr. Erin. 'His prologue, even without an "if" in it, would damn any play. I'll write to Burgess—Sir James will do it, I'll warrant.'

And Sir James did it accordingly, and in a fashion much more agreeable to 'Vortigern's' sponsors.

> No common cause your verdict now demands,
> Before the court immortal Shakespeare stands;
>
> . . . .
>
> Stamp it your own, assert your poet's fame,
> And add fresh wreaths to Shakespeare's honoured name.

There was no doubt in Mr. Erin's mind as to Sir James Bland Burgess being a better poet than Mr. Pye.

There were other hitches—nay, absolute breaks-down —which could not be so easily mended. Mrs. Siddons, who it was hoped would play the chief female character, Edmunda, had a severe cold, which was suspected by many people, and known by her friends, to be a stage cold —a malady which actors and actresses assume at pleasure as a pretext for declining any objectionable part. When a barrister refuses a brief, it is naturally concluded that his client's cause is precarious—a lawyer, it is argued, would never send money away from his doors except for the gravest reasons; and similarly the 'Vortigern' suffered in public estimation when the news of Mrs. Siddons's indisposition got abroad. Her reason, as Malone and Company averred, was that 'the whole play was an audacious imposition.' In this case that flattering unction of 'There are as good fish in the sea,' &c., could hardly

be laid to Mr. Erin's soul; it was unquestionably a bitter disappointment; the part had to be given to Mrs. Powell, a much prettier and younger woman, but not the queen of the stage. His sister's conduct, too, seemed to have an unfavourable effect on Kemble, whose interest in the play was already at the best but lukewarm, and it was felt absolutely necessary to conciliate him.

Mr. Erin wrote to him to say that, notwithstanding the circumstance of 'Vortigern and Rowena' being the production of the immortal bard, the great tragedian was at liberty to use his own excellent judgment in preparing it for the stage.

A cold reply was received, to the effect that it should be acted faithfully from the copy sent to the theatre.

These were bitter drops; but where is the cup of human prosperity without them? In reading the record of even the most fortunate man's career, we may be sure that, though it appears to run with such unbroken smoothness, there is many a hitch. We hear the triumphant pæans, but not the deep low notes of chagrin and disappointment that to the hero's own ear accompany them and turn his blood to gall. The shining shield, bossed with victories, appears to be of solid gold, but there is but a thin coating of it, and underneath lies rusted and corroding iron. It is something, however, to show gold at all; and Margaret was prompt with her comfort.

'When, my dear Willie, was good fortune without its drawbacks? These are but spots in the sun of our prosperity, and we should have only room in our hearts for gratitude. Think how much sunshine we have had of late, and how far beyond our expectations. When you first chanced upon these wonderful discoveries, how great a thing it would have seemed to you to light on such a treasure-trove as the "Vortigern," and then to have it accepted by Sheridan for Drury Lane! Think of that!'

'Quite true, my darling; and yet you have not mentioned the highest gift that Fortune has vouchsafed me,

compared with which all her other favours are mere gilt and tinsel—your dear self.'

'Tut, tut! you are a born actor, sir, and should offer your services to Mr. Kemble.'

He looked at her with troubled eyes, gravely, almost sorrowfully, then folded her to his breast without a word.

It was clear, she thought, that Mrs. Siddons's refusal to play her part had disappointed him cruelly.

One day two ladies called to see Mr. Erin. The antiquary, as it happened, was out; upon hearing which, they expressed a wish to see his son. William Henry, who no more went to the office in the New Inn, but transacted his father's business for him at home (not so much that he was necessary to it as because the old gentleman preferred to keep the lad about him), was neither mounting drawings nor cataloguing prints, but exchanging pretty nothings with Margaret, when the servant came with her message.

'Ladies to see *you*, Willie,' said she, laughing. 'I am almost inclined to be jealous; I wonder what can be their business?'

'They want to see the MSS., I suppose,' he said indifferently. 'Well, at all events I can't get at them; your uncle has taken the key of the chest with him.'

Margaret shook her head.

'They have come about the play,' she said; 'they are actresses.'

This was a conclusion at which William Henry had already arrived, though he had not thought it worth while to mention it. His heart, indeed, had leaped up within him at the news in question; not that he was the least inclined to play the gay Lothario, but that everything connected with the representation of the 'Vortigern' immensely interested him. Hitherto he had been kept out of it; the whole affair had been carried on up to this point without his interference, as indeed was natural enough; it was not as if the 'Vortigern' had been his play.

'*It is very* unlikely,' said William Henry diplomatic-

ally; 'but it is possible they want Mr. Erin's opinion about some reading, and since I know his views I had perhaps better see them.'

His tone was interrogative, but he did not wait to hear her opinion on the subject, but at once repaired to the parlour. That apartment, hallowed by so many antiquarian associations, was now tenanted by two persons of a very different stamp from those who generally visited it. 'If critics and commentators indeed were beings like these,' was the young rogue's reflection, '"cherished folios" would be things to be envied.'

Both ladies were young, though an expert in such matters, which William Henry was not, might have come to the conclusion that they were not quite so young as they looked. It is true they were neither painted nor powdered; but besides being very fashionably and becomingly dressed, there was that brightness of expression in their lively faces which makes more head against time than all the cosmetics in the world. It is always a matter of surprise among dull people that actresses, even of a high type, should be so popular, and often make such good matches with men of culture and good breeding. The reason is, I think, that if they are not natural, they at least do their best to appear so; they do not stifle nature, as is the habit of some of their sex who are much more highly placed. Languor and studied indifference are not of themselves attractive, and they are suspected, and with reason, of being very convenient cloaks for stupidity.

The intelligence of these ladies shone in their eyes, which also twinkled with amusement. They had both had a very hard time of it during one portion of their lives, but it had extinguished neither their good-nature nor their sense of humour. The appearance of William Henry, who looked all youth and simplicity, instead of the snuffy old antiquary whom they had expected to see, tickled them excessively. The fact that he was very *good-looking* also aroused their interest. If they had *come upon* business, in short, they remained for pleasure;

and the sense of this (for it was unmistakable) embarrassed not a little their involuntary host.

By sight he knew both the ladies; the younger was Mrs. Powell, a handsome woman, very tall and elegant, who had of late stepped into a much higher rank of her profession, as, indeed, was clear enough from her having been made the substitute of Mrs. Siddons in the forthcoming tragedy. Just now, however, she was undertaking comedy, and her melodious tones and speaking face made a harmony like 'the voice and the instrument.'

The other lady was Mrs. Jordan, who, without enjoying so high a dramatic reputation, was a still greater favourite with the public. She, too, was tall and comely, but her beauty was of a simpler type—it would be better described as loveliness. The charms which had carried all before them when she made her fame as 'The Country Girl' were more mature, but not less attractive. The world of playgoers was at her feet, the knowledge that an eminent personage had gained her affections, and even, it was said, contracted a private marriage with her, aroused the envy of many a gilded flutterer, and had driven at least one of them to despair. Her tenderness of disposition and generosity to the distressed were notorious, and could be read in her smile.

'We have ventured to call upon you, Mr. Erin, as you may perhaps guess, with reference to "Vortigern and Rowena,"' said Mrs. Powell.

'I am so sorry, but my father is not at home,' stammered William Henry.

'Well, really!' returned the lady reproachfully.

'At all events, *we* are not sorry,' said Mrs. Jordan slily.

'I did not mean—you know what I mean,' pleaded William Henry, with a blush that they probably envied. 'I am so sorry to be so awkward, but I am very young.'

'Does he mean to say that we are *not?*' ejaculated Mrs. Powell, with a majestic air. 'Great heavens!'

'*I think, sister*, since he has thrown himself upon

mercy of the court,' interposed Mrs. Jordan good-naturedly, 'that we should not be hard upon him.'

'Youth and inexperience,' exclaimed Mrs. Powell judicially, 'are no excuses for crime; but since my learned sister——You have seen her as Portia, no doubt, young man, and a very pretty lawyer she makes—don't you think so?'

It was like two people speaking from the same mouth—the one all gaiety, the other all merriment.

'Of course I have seen her, who has not?' said William Henry, plucking up his courage, though with such desperation that it almost came away by the roots.

'That's much better,' smiled Mrs. Jordan approvingly.

'I am not sure,' returned her companion. 'Do you not also remember *me*, sir?'

'Who could forget you who remembers "Juliet," madam?' returned the young gentleman, with his hand (as he thought) upon his heart.

'Left side, sir, the next time,' observed his tormentor encouragingly; 'anatomy has not been a special study with you, but you improve in manners. We are here to test your gallantry, to sue for favours.'

'Whatever lies within my humble power to do for you, madam, may be considered as done.'

'Did I say "improves"? Why, he's perfect,' said Mrs. Powell, with a laughing glance at her companion. 'But it's all for love of Portia,' she added, with a sigh.

'No, of Juliet,' returned Mrs. Jordan, with another shake of her pretty head.

There was a gentle tap at the door; a face, a very charming one, looked in, and with a murmured apology withdrew as suddenly as it had come.

'Curiosity,' said Mrs. Jordan softly, her eyes twinkling like two stars.

'Jealousy,' answered Mrs. Powell derisively. 'I do not ask *which* was it, but *who* was it, sir?'

'I don't know,' said William Henry boldly; 'I had my back to the door.'

At this both ladies burst out laughing, if an expression so coarse can be applied to as musical mirth as ever rippled from the lips of woman.

'He *doesn't know*,' cried Mrs. Powell; 'and this is the young gentleman we took for all simplicity.—How dare you, sir? As if her fairy footfall was not evidence enough to your throbbing ears, as if her coming here at all to see how you were getting on with two wicked young women from Drury Lane was not sufficient proof of her identity!' Then turning to her companion, 'How dreadful to contemplate is his depravity! So young in years, and yet so versed in duplicity.'

'You are engaged to be married to her, of course,' said Mrs. Jordan softly.

'Well, yes, madam,' admitted William Henry; he could not help thinking how charming she would look as the page, Flavia.

'Don't be ashamed of it, young gentleman,' said Mrs. Jordan gravely.

'It is to your credit, remember, if not to hers,' interpolated Mrs. Powell ambiguously.

'And does this pretty creature live in the house?' continued Mrs. Jordan, with tender interest.

'Yes, madam; she is my cousin, Margaret Slade.'

'How nice! I never had a cousin when I was so young as that. How I envy her!'

'"This shall to the Duke,"' quoted Mrs. Powell menacingly. Then they both laughed again.

William Henry was dazzled, delighted, and a little uncomfortable.

'We must not take up his time,' said Mrs. Jordan, rising and consulting her watch.

'Now that we know that he is so very much *engaged*,' assented Mrs. Powell slily.

'But you have not told me your business, ladies,' observed William Henry naïvely.

Then they both laughed again, as they [illegible] *the truth was that*, having something to

pleasant in hand, they had forgotten all about it; they were not bees, but butterflies.

'The fact is—only your company is so delightful it put our business out of our heads—we want to go over the play with you.'

'There is but one copy in the house, ladies, in yonder safe, and I am sorry to say my father has the key.'

'Then you must bring it to the theatre to-morrow morning, sir,' said Mrs. Powell imperiously.

William Henry shook his head. 'That is the original Shakespeare MS., madam; I could not venture on such a step.'

'What ridiculous scruples!' cried Mrs. Powell impatiently, beating her pretty foot upon the floor.

'But we can use the acting copy,' suggested Mrs. Jordan, 'and—if this young gentleman will be so good as to come himself.' Anything sweeter or more seductive than her tone it was impossible to imagine; even the very pause and break in the sentence had literally an unspeakable charm.

'I will come with the greatest pleasure,' said William Henry.

There was indeed no reason why he should not do so, but if there had been it would have been all the same. He was fascinated.

'To-morrow, then, at eleven o'clock,' she said, and held out her hand; he pressed it, and she returned the pressure, but with mirthful eyes.

Mrs. Powell shook hands with him too, and shook her head as she did so. 'Poor young man,' she said; 'poor Margaret!'

Then they both laughed again: they laughed in the parlour, they laughed in the passage, they laughed on the very door-step. As Margaret said of them after their departure, somewhat severely, 'they seemed to be a pair of very frivolous young women.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

A ROYAL PATRON.

William Henry performed his promise punctually, and presented himself next morning at Drury Lane. He had never been inside a theatre by daylight before, and the contrast of the scene to that to which he had been accustomed struck him very forcibly. If any young gentleman belonging to me were stage-struck, I should ask the permission of the lessee of one of our National Theatres to allow me to introduce him into its auditorium some dullish morning. If his enthusiasm survived, I will believe that the passion for the sea will still remain in a boy's breast after a visit to a ship's cockpit. The spectacle of those draped galleries, those empty seats and ill-lit space, where all was wont to be light and laughter, is little short of ghastly. William Henry indeed only caught glimpses of it here and there, through the eye-holes over the doors, as he was led through the echoing passages to the back of the stage; but they were sufficient. He in vain attempted to picture to himself the very different appearance the place would bear when probably he should see it next, at the representation of 'Vortigern and Rowena.'

His imagination was chilled. The object of his visit, even though it might well have done so, since it was to be interviewed by two of the most charming women on the English stage, did not fill him with the pleasurable anticipation which he had experienced when he had received their invitation. There was no harm in it, of course, but he had come without Margaret's knowledge, and his conscience reproached him for so doing. It was, no doubt, her own fault; she had shown such unmistakable feelings of jealousy on the previous day, and had expressed such uncharitable views on the character of actresses in general, that he had shrunk from telling her of the appointment

he had made for to-morrow. It was a pity that the dear girl was so unreasonable; for, though she had entirely agreed with him that Mrs. Powell's conduct, of which he had given her an amusing version, had been pert, she had failed to understand what a contrast that of Mrs. Jordan afforded, or how distinctly it bespoke a simple and ingenuous nature. He had never dreamt, of course, of repeating Mrs. Powell's parting remark about 'poor Margaret;' but if such a notion had entered his mind, the manner in which the dear girl had received other details of the little interview would have forbidden it. He felt quite certain that she was capable of believing that Mrs. Jordan was ready to fall in love with him, or even had already done it. The very idea of such a thing, when she knew he was engaged to somebody else, was, of course, ridiculous. He thought that it would have set Margaret's mind at ease to tell her that he had given that piece of information to the ladies, whereas it had aroused her indignation, not indeed against him, but against them. 'What right had they to ask such questions? It was impertinent, forward, and indelicate; and she did hope that those young women would never commit the impropriety of calling in Norfolk Street and asking to see a young gentleman, with whom they could have no earthly business, again.'

And now, unknown to Margaret, he was going to see *them*. The conscience at seventeen is tender, and it was no wonder William Henry's smote him. At that age, however, the memory (for some things) is unfortunately short, and when a door suddenly opened from a labyrinthine passage into a prettily furnished room, where Mrs. Jordan, reclining in an arm-chair, was reading with rapt attention a certain manuscript he recognised, he thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful before.

She arose with a pleasant smile, and a natural coquettish air which became her charmingly, and bade him welcome.

'Pray come in,' said she, for he stood at the door entranced; 'it is not everyone that is admitted into my dressing-room, but I shan't bite you.'

It was not the least like a dressing-room except that it had a multiplicity of mirrors, but her calling it so discomposed him (he could not help thinking to himself how very much more, if she had but known it, it would have discomposed Margaret); his knees had a tendency to knock together, and he felt that he looked like a fool.

'You need not be afraid,' continued the lady, smiling, not displeased perhaps to see the effect she had produced in him, the symptoms of which were not unfamiliar to her: 'Mrs. Powell will be here directly—she is not so punctual as you are.'

'She has not so much reason to be, madam,' said William Henry. The words had occurred to him as if by inspiration, but directly they were uttered he repented of them. He had intended them to be very gallant, but they now struck him as exceedingly foolish.

'He is certainly a very amusing young man,' said the lady, as if addressing a third person. 'Pray sit down, sir. I saw your father after I had the pleasure of seeing you yesterday. You are not in the least alike. You should have seen Kemble and him together; it was as good as any play. They don't hit it off together so well as you and I do. Perhaps you will say again they have not so much reason.'

'It was a very unfortunate remark of mine,' said William Henry penitently.

'I don't know that; you needn't be so hard upon yourself. I think you had an idea that you were somehow paying me a compliment. For my part, however, I have enough of compliments, and prefer a little honesty for a change.'

William Henry bethought him of saying something about the genuineness of some compliments, but by the expression of her face, which had suddenly become grave, he judged that she had had enough of the subject, and remained silent.

'And how is Margaret?'

The young man blushed to the roots of his hair, and blushed the more because he felt himself blushing.

'I have heard of the young lady from your father, and nothing but good of her. I hope'—this with great severity—'that you are not ashamed of her, sir.'

'No, madam.'

'And I hope, sir'—this with an angry flash of her bright eyes—'that you are not ashamed of *me*.'

'Madam!'

'Then why did you not tell her that you were coming here?'

William Henry bit his lip, and was about to stammer something, he knew not what, when fortunately there was a knock at the door.

'Come in,' said Mrs. Jordan.

The knocking was continued very loudly, but the permission was not repeated. Mrs. Jordan began to laugh, and at every recurrence of the summons laughed more and more. Then the door was opened a very little way. 'Are you sure that I may come in, Dorothy? Are you sure I don't intrude?' inquired a musical voice in accents of pretended anxiety.

And then Mrs. Powell entered.

'You are late,' observed Mrs. Jordan reprovingly; 'that is not like your usual habits.'

'I thought you might like to have a little time to yourselves, my dear,' replied the other with great simplicity. 'I am quite sorry to trouble you with business matters, Mr. Erin, but the fact is it's pressing. I must have Edmunda altered; she is heavy in hand.'

'But, my dear madam, what has that to do with *me*?'

'With you? Why, everything; to whom else can I come? Kemble won't listen to me; your father, a most respectable man, no doubt, is quite impracticable, and only raves about the Immortal Bard.'

'But I cannot alter Shakespeare's play, madam.'

'*Why* not? He's dead, isn't he? Besides, his plays have *been often* enough altered before. Garrick did it for one.

'Perhaps, madam; but then I am not Garrick. I can no more alter a play than write one.'

'Upon my word, my dear,' interposed Mrs. Jordan, 'there is a good deal in what Mr. Erin says. I want to have things altered in my own part; but if, as he tells us——'

'Pooh! nonsense!' broke in the other; 'you have nothing to complain of in Flavia. She is in man's clothes, which fit you to a nicety, and that is all you need care about.'

'If he takes my advice he won't touch the play,' said Mrs. Jordan, fairly trembling with rage.

'There you see the Country Girl,' said Mrs. Powell, pointing to her friend with a little hand that trembled too. 'Her temper is only so long' (she indicated the twentieth part of an inch). 'Nobody can say that she has not a natural manner, or does not know how to blush.'

'Nobody can say of Mrs. Powell,' retorted the other, 'when she tries to blush, that her beauty is only skin deep.'

It was certainly a most terrible scene, and most heartily did William Henry wish himself back in Norfolk Street. At that very moment, however, when he expected to see them dig their nails into one another, both ladies burst out laughing. He began to think that either their rage or their laughter must needs be artificial, whereas, in fact, while they lasted they were both real enough. Mirth with them was the natural safety-valve of all their passions, and a very excellent mechanical contrivance too.

'But won't you just lighten my Edmunda a little, Mr. Erin,' persisted Mrs. Powell; 'a touch here and a touch there?'

'My dear madam, supposing even I were capable of doing such a thing (which I am not), just consider what people would say if I touched the play. Even now our enemies attack its authenticity, and what a handle must *such a proceeding* needs afford them!'

'That is surely reasonable,' observed Mrs. Jordan for the second time.

'I don't know about reasonable,' returned Mrs. Powell, with a most bewitching pout; 'but I know if you were not here I could persuade him.'

'Shall I leave you?' said Mrs. Jordan, making a feint of retiring from the room.

'Oh no,' pleaded William Henry involuntarily.

'Well, upon my life,' cried Mrs. Powell, 'you are a most complimentary young man! However, I'll leave *you*, which, considering the company you are in, will be quite revenge enough.' She stood at the door, drawn up to her full height like a tragedy queen; then suddenly altering her tone, her air, her voice, and becoming as if by magic the very picture of pity, she added, 'Poor Margaret!' and was gone.

'She is a queer mad creature, but means no harm,' said Mrs. Jordan consolingly. 'She was angry at your refusal to alter her part for her, and when she is angry she will say anything. You must not mind her. Now, I've taken a fancy to you, Master——By-the-bye, what is your name?'

'Erin.'

'Chut! I mean your Christian name?'

'William Henry.'

'And what does Margaret call you?'

'Willie.'

'Very good; then since I have no wish to poach on Margaret's preserves, I shall call you "Henry." I have taken a fancy to you, Master Henry, and mean to do you a service; a gentleman of influence, with whom I have some interest, wants to look at these Shakespeare manuscripts, and has directed them to be at his house this morning.'

'I am afraid they will not be there,' said William Henry. 'My father has never permitted them to leave Norfolk Street except once, at the personal request of the Prince Regent.'

'Nevertheless, I think the gentleman I speak of will have his way,' said the actress, smiling. 'Now I wish him, in case he sees the manuscripts, to see their discoverer also. Perhaps he may give him a helping hand.'

'You are very kind,' said William Henry gently: it was not gratitude for the favour to come that moved him, for he had no suspicion how it was to be realised, but her evident warmth of feeling towards him. Her manner had not only an exquisite grace, but an unmistakable tenderness; and then she was so exceedingly handsome. A young man's heart is like the tinder, which in those days, with flint and steel, was the substitute for our lucifer matches; away from its box it is liable to danger from every spark.

'You are very good and kind,' repeated William Henry mechanically; he felt an impulse, hard to be withstood, to add 'and very beautiful.'

'I am not good,' said his companion gravely, 'but I suppose I am kind enough. It is much easier, my young friend, to be kind than good. Well, now I am going to take you to this gentleman.'

She put on her cloak and bonnet, and led the way to the stage door of the theatre. A closed carriage, well appointed, was at the door, in waiting for her, and they took their seats. In a few minutes they were whirled to their destination—a huge red house set in a courtyard, with which William Henry was unacquainted, or which in the perturbation of his mind he failed to recognise. They passed through certain corridors into a large room looking on a garden. It was handsomely furnished; a harp stood in one corner, a piano in the other; the walls were hung with beautiful pictures. But what aroused William Henry's amazement, and prevented him from giving his attention elsewhere, was the circumstance that on a table by the window were arranged the whole collection of the Shakespeare papers.

'You are looking for your father's blood upon them,' said Mrs. Jordan, smiling; 'you are thinking to yourself *that he must* surely have been cut to pieces ere he would

have permitted them to leave his hands. But the fact is——Hush! here comes your future patron.'

William Henry was used to a patron, and for that matter to a sufficiently mysterious one; but for the moment he was devoured by curiosity, mingled with a certain awe. The appearance of the new-comer, if he had expected to see anyone very magnificent, must have been a disappointment to him, for it certainly was not of an imposing kind. There entered the room, so rapidly that he almost seemed to run, a young man of thirty, somewhat inclined to corpulence, with a cheery good-natured face, but decidedly commonplace in its expression.

'Well, well, Dorothy, you see I'm here,' he said, without taking the least notice of the stranger's presence. 'Now let us see these manuscripts—wonderful manuscripts—and get it over.' He spoke with great volubility, and plumped down on a chair by the table as if in a great hurry. 'What funny writing, and what queer ink and paper! and what great seals! Shakespeare was never Lord Chancellor, was he?'

'I don't think he was, sir,' said Mrs. Jordan, laughing. 'It was the fashion in those days for deeds to wear fob and watch and chain.'

'Fobs, fobs? I see no fobs. So this is "Lear;" I've seen "Lear." The play where everybody has their eyes put out. So he wrote it like this, did he? I wonder how anybody could read it. Hambllett, Hamblett; I never heard of him. Notes of hand. 'Gad! I know *them* pretty well.'

'This is the young gentleman, sir, to whom we owe the discovery of all these manuscripts,' said Mrs. Jordan, drawing his attention to William Henry.

'Ay, ay,' said the new-comer, wheeling his chair round to get a good view of William Henry's face. 'You found them, did you? those that hide can find; that's what people tell me, you know.'

The speech was such a rude one, that it might have been uttered by the first Gentleman in Europe, nor indeed

was William Henry by any means certain that he was not standing in his august presence; but there was a good-natured twinkle in the stranger's eye which mitigated the harshness of his words. Never, indeed, before had the doubts concerning the genuineness of the manuscripts been expressed in a manner so personally offensive to the young fellow; and notwithstanding his conviction that the speaker was a man of very high rank, he might not have hesitated to resent it, but for a certain appealing look which Mrs. Jordan cast at him. He remembered that it was for his own sake that she had asked him to meet this man, and that if he offended him she herself might be the sufferer. He therefore only answered with a forced smile, 'I should think no one but Mr. Malone could have told you that.'

'And who the deuce is Mr. Malone?' was the contemptuous rejoinder; a question that put the coping-stone on the young fellow's embarrassment, and, indeed, utterly discomfited him. He felt transported into strange regions, with a new atmosphere; a world that had never heard of Mr. Malone the commentator was unintelligible to him. It is one of the lessons that can only be taught by years, and of which the 'Montys' and 'Algys' of high life are as ignorant as the 'Jacks' and 'Harrys' of low, that our respective horizons are limited.

As William Henry stood tongue-tied, a sudden burst of melody filled the room. Mrs. Jordan had sat down to the piano, and was singing with exquisite pathos a song that was very familiar to him.

> Detraction strove to turn her heart
> And sour her gentle mind;
> But Charity still kept her part,
> And meekness to her soul did bind.

'Very nice, and very true,' murmured the strange gentleman approvingly, keeping time with head and hand to the tune. His irritation had departed like an evil spirit exorcised; into his coarse countenance had stolen an expression of pure enjoyment; his eyes were full of gentle-

ness and even affection. Such power have the voice and the instrument (when accompanied by a pretty face) even on the most commonplace natures.

'Now what is that, what is that?' he exclaimed excitedly, when the song was done. 'And why have I never heard it before, my dear?'

'Because it is brand-new, sir,' said Mrs. Jordan, with a bewitching curtsey. 'I sing it as Flavia in this new play of "Vortigern and Rowena," which is to be performed next month at Drury Lane, and which I hope you will come to see.'

'Certainly, certainly. Why shouldn't I?

> Detraction strove to turn her heart
> And sour her gentle mind.

But it didn't succeed, did it, Dorothy?'

'I hope not, sir,' returned the lady modestly. 'Then I may take it as a promise, sir, that you will honour this performance with your presence; it will be on the second of April.'

'Yes, yes: tell Sherry to keep a box—a box. And now I'm off to the Privy Council. Sorry I can't take you with me, Dorothy, but you're not sworn in yet—not sworn in.'

And off he shambled; his walk and talk were very like one another—rapid, irregular, and fitful.

'There,' cried Mrs. Jordan triumphantly, 'I have got what I wanted for you, Master Harry; the play will now have the royal patronage.'

'Then that gentleman is——'

'His Royal Highness the Duke of Clarence, *my husband*.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

A DROLL rogue of my acquaintance, whom (one tried to think) the force of circumstance, rather than any natural disposition, had driven from the pavement of integrity into the gutter, used to maintain that it was better to confess one's peccadilloes, with such colourable excuses as might suggest themselves, than to conceal them. In the former case you might, with a struggle, get out of the scrape and have done with it; in the latter case you were never safe from discovery, and when it came there was sure to be a catastrophe.

There was, it is true, no peccadillo in William Henry's keeping that appointment we wot of with those two charming ornaments of Drury Lane Theatre, but since he had an impression that Margaret might not like it, he ought, according to my friend's philosophy, to have told her all about it. After his interview with his Royal Highness (which could not be concealed) he felt that this straightforward course was the right one, and, as he returned home in the hackney carriage with the precious manuscripts, amused himself with the thoughts of the pleasure Margaret would exhibit on hearing of the greatness that had been thrust upon him. When her mind had been dazzled by visions of royalty, he had intended it to slip out in a casual way that he had been indebted for his introduction to his Royal Highness to one of those professional persons who had called in Norfolk Street the previous day on business, and whom he had been compelled to receive in place of his father—a Mrs. Jordan. The whole thing ran as smoothly and naturally in his own mind as could be. It was like some well-oiled mechanical machine, which *the inventor* (though of course it was no invention, only

an adaptation) feels confident will do all he expects of it, only somehow in practice it doesn't act. He found Margaret not in the least interested about his Royal Highness, and very much excited about the lady who had been the mere medium of his introduction, and whose part in the matter he had taken, it must be confessed, some pains to minimise.

'You have not been frank with me, William Henry,' she said, with some severity.

He had it upon his lips to say that since he was William Henry he could hardly be Frank, but he felt she was in no mood for banter; and, moreover, with that name there naturally occurred to him the thought of Frank Dennis, which made his heart stand still. It was not her anger that he feared, nor even the diminution of her love, which had been indicated very significantly by the mention of his double name (which she had not used for months) instead of 'Willie,' but the possible diversion of her love to another object. Perhaps she was already making a comparison in her mind between himself and a certain other person who, whatever his faults, would, she knew, never have deceived her.

It was not impossible that love could stray, for had it not done so but a few hours ago, within his own experience, and with no such provocation? It was very different, of course, in his case; there is a certain latitude given to men, and the handsomest man on the stage, or off it, would, he was well aware, not have caused Margaret to forget her Willie even for an instant. But then women, when they are jealous, are capable of anything, and from pique will not only 'be off' with those they love, but sometimes 'be on' with another.

'I am very sorry, Margaret,' he stammered, 'but I really don't know what you mean.'

'Then your face belies your words,' was the cold reply. 'Why did you not tell me yesterday that you were going *to meet that* woman at Drury Lane this morning?'

'*There* were two of them,' said William Henry

eagerly, urged, as he felt, by some fortunate inspiration to tell the whole truth.

'Oh, there were two, were there?' Though she strove to keep her tone the same, there was a relaxation in her severity that did not escape him; the reflection that there was safety in numbers had no doubt occurred to her. 'You omitted that circumstance, sir, in your previous narrative, with, no doubt, many others.'

'Indeed, Margaret, I have told you all; that is, all that I thought could have any interest for you. I ought to have said, of course, that the invitation to the theatre came from both the ladies: they wanted to have some alteration made in the play for them (which of course was out of the question). Mrs. Powell was very angry about it; I should think that she had a temper of her own.'

'I don't want to hear about Mrs. Powell.'

There was once a young gentleman who was endeavouring to make himself agreeable as a *raconteur* in the presence of royalty. When he had done his story the royal lips let fall these terrible words: 'We are not amused.' Poor William Henry found himself in much the same position. His reminiscences of Mrs. Powell were, as it were, cut off at the main. Margaret's instinct had eliminated that factor from the sum of the matter as insignificant; there was another person to talk about, it was true, but he was averse to enter upon that subject. Unhappily it was suggested to him as a topic.

'Who, may I ask, is this Mrs. Jordan?'

'Well, she was the other lady, of course, who called here,' said William Henry (he felt that he was turning a lively red, and it was so important to him that he should keep his colour). 'She is to perform Flavia in the play.'

'The person in man's clothes?' observed Margaret icily.

'Well, she plays the Page; you can hardly expect her to play him in petticoats. It was not a dress rehearsal,' stammered the young man, 'if you mean that. They

simply asked me—both of them—to step round to the theatre this morning and render them some professional assistance, which, as it happened, I am unable to do. I cannot for the life of me see what harm there was in that.'

'Then why did you not tell me you were going?'

It was the same dreadful question over again. Of course he ought to have told her, and if he had had any idea that she would have come to know of it he certainly would have done so. He looked so sorry (not to say silly) that Margaret's heart melted a little.

'You know how I hate anything clandestine and underhand, William Henry.'

'I know it,' he answered, with a deep sigh. His face was one of such abject misery, that one would have said, whatever he had done, he was sufficiently punished for it. Her heart melted more and more: he went on penitently,—

'Of course I ought to have told you, Margaret, but I did not conceal it because there was anything to be ashamed of. Only I knew you would not like it, that you would think there was harm in it—as you do, it seems—where there is no harm. It was surely a great piece of good nature on their part, after I had disappointed them about the play, to offer to do their best for it, and to get the Duke——'

'Did they both go with you to St. James's Palace?' she put in drily.

He was on the point of saying that there had been only room for two in the coach, but fortunately he was a young gentleman who thought before he spoke. It would certainly not have been a satisfactory explanation, and the very idea that he had been about to make it turned him scarlet.

'No wonder you are ashamed of yourself, sir,' said she, perceiving his confusion. 'Why do you talk to me about "they" and "them," when you know that only one of *these* women had anything to do with the matter?'

'*Well*, naturally, my dear, Mrs. Jordan was the person

to introduce me to his Royal Highness, since she has been privately married to him.'

'I don't believe one word of it.'

'I can only say she told me so,' said William Henry simply.

Margaret did not give much credit to the assertion of this lady, but she believed what William Henry said. After all, the poor young fellow had probably meant no harm, nor even dreamt of the meshes into which this designing female would have drawn him. He had only been indiscreet and a little surreptitious, and had been rated enough.

'You don't know what these actresses are, Willie,' she said gravely, 'nor what pleasure they take in making misery and estrangements between honest people. Nothing this woman would like better, I'm sure of it, than to come between you and me.'

'My dear Margaret, how can you say such things? If you had only seen her!'

'I don't want to see her,' interpolated Margaret quickly.

'A person entirely devoted to her profession, in which she is justly held in the highest esteem.'

'I don't deny that she is a good actress,' returned Margaret significantly; 'indeed, I have no doubt of it.'

'And she spoke of you so kindly.'

'Of me? How dared she speak of me?' cried Margaret, with flashing eye. 'What does she know of me?'

'Well, she saw you just for a moment when you looked in by accident yesterday, and she said how beautiful and kind you looked, and congratulated me——'

'It was shameful of you to tell those women of our engagement,' she put in.

'Why not? What was there to be ashamed of? Am I not proud of it? Why should I not have told them?'

His simplicity was very touching. If there had been such a thing as a male *ingénue* upon the stage, the speaker would have been the very man to play it.

'How they must have laughed at you in their sleeves, my poor Willie!' she answered pityingly.

He did not think it necessary to state that they *had* laughed at him, and by no means in their sleeves.

'I will never see them again if you don't wish it,' said William Henry, still sticking to the plural number. 'Only I suppose when the "Vortigern" comes to be acted it will be necessary to do so just for a night or two.'

'Oh, I don't mind your seeing them at the play, Willie. We shall, of course, be there together.'

He had meant that his assistance would probably be required behind the scenes. Indeed, Mrs. Jordan had taken it for granted that he would be a constant visitor at the theatre while the play was in preparation, and he had very willingly acquiesced in that arrangement, but he had not the courage to say so. He was only too thankful that Margaret's suspicions were at last set at rest. He knew that she was of a jealous disposition, and also that she abhorred deceit, and he loved her none the less on either account, but there were reasons why her manifestation of such excessive displeasure on so small a matter alarmed him, and made his heart heavy within him. However, in a month or two they would be married. He would then be her very own, and she would have no misgivings about him; and as to deceit, there would be no further cause for it, and what was past and gone would surely be forgiven. But still his heart was heavy.

Considering Margaret's youth and her middle-class position in life, the irritation and annoyance she had exhibited may seem unnatural as well as uncalled for. Young women of her age and rank are not nowadays supposed to know so much about the temptations of the stage, but in her time matters were different. The charms of this and that popular actress, and even their mode of life, were topics of common talk, and there was none of them more talked about than Mrs. Jordan. It is not, therefore, to be wondered at that Margaret regarded her as a syren attracted by the notoriety (not to mention the innocence and beauty) of her Willie, who designed to

wile him from the quiet harbour of domestic love into the stormy seas of passion. Moreover, it must be said for Margaret that her jealousy was not like that of some people who, while resenting the interference of others with their private property, do not lavish on it any especial kindness of their own. She had always been the friend and defender of William Henry, even before he became her lover, and had long-established claims on his fidelity; and it galled her that one glimpse of a pretty face should have so worked with him as to induce him to renew acquaintance with it, under what seemed to her such suspicious circumstances, and especially in so secret and clandestine a fashion. It had always been a complaint of hers in the old days that William Henry was inclined to deception. It was in relation, however, to Mr. Erin only that she had observed it, and in that case there had been, certainly, excuses for the young man; but that he should have deceived *her*—if, at least, concealment could be called deception—she justly considered to be less pardonable. However, she had now said her say, and with a vigour that the circumstances scarcely called for; indeed, she felt that she had been somewhat hard upon him. However wrong he had been to try to hoodwink her, that had been the extent of his offending. He could hardly have declined to go to the theatre; and, indeed, she confessed to herself that while the play was in progress it was not reasonable to expect him to hold no communication with those who were to perform in it. The matter interested him very much, nor did she forget that it was mainly on her own account, for did not her uncle's consent to their union depend upon the play's success?

When Mr. Erin presently announced the first rehearsal at the theatre, and suggested that William Henry should be present to witness it, Margaret made no opposition; her objections, in short, to the young man's renewing his acquaintance with the fair Flavia were tacitly withdrawn. She acknowledged to herself that things could scarcely be otherwise, and that, after all, there could be no possible harm in the matter; and from that moment, whenever

her Willie was out of her sight, she was more tormented with the fires of jealousy than ever.

She knew that he saw Mrs. Jordan constantly, and was yet compelled to ignore it; she burned to know what passed between them, yet scorned to inquire. The news William Henry brought back with him of the prospects of the play seemed hardly of any consequence to her compared with matters on which he never spoke at all. What was it to her that Kemble was unsympathetic, dogged, and studiously apathetic in his rendering of Vortigern; that Phillimore as Horsus was more like a buffoon than a hero? What was it to her, on the other hand, that Mrs. Powell as Edmunda surpassed Mrs. Siddons herself? What she wished to know, and could not ask, was how that hussy Mrs. Jordan was behaving herself, not as Flavia in tights (though that idea was far from consolatory), but in her own proper person. Of one thing she felt convinced, that not content with seeing her Willie every day, this woman corresponded with him; that he received letters from her under that very roof. Else how was it that when the post now brought him missives in a hand that was strange to her, he would slip them into his pocket without a word of comment, and with an air of indifference that did not impose upon her for an instant? William Henry had now a little sitting-room of his own, and she noticed that when these letters arrived he remained in it longer alone than usual; reading them, no doubt, over and over, perhaps replying to them in the same fervid style in which (she felt sure) they were written, and possibly (for Margaret, though no poet like her Willie, had a lively imagination of her own) even kissing them.

One morning the epilogue to 'Vortigern and Rowena' arrived from Mr. Merry, and was discussed at breakfast-time word by word, as befitted so important a document. An hour afterwards, when William Henry had gone out, as Margaret was only too well convinced, to Drury Lane, Mr. Erin returned to the subject.

'I don't much like those concluding lines in the first part,' he said,—

> The scattered flowers he left, benignly save,
> Posthumous flowers; the garland of the grave.

It ran "benignly save," did it not, Madge?'

'I am not sure, uncle.'

'Then just go and get the thing out of Samuel's room.'

Margaret went and looked about her for the manuscript in question. It was nowhere to be found. But in her researches she came upon another document spread out in the half-opened drawer of the writing-table; it was written in a delicate hand on large letter-paper, and it was almost impossible that she could avoid reading the commencement of it.

'My dear W. H.,' it began, and then followed a mass of heterogeneous words without sense or meaning, as if they had been taken at random out of some dictionary. It is probable that Margaret had never heard of a cryptogram, but she had heard of communications written in cypher, and it flashed upon her mind at once that she was looking at some letter of that nature. It was bad enough that this abandoned hussy of Drury Lane, who dwelt but a mile away from them, and saw her Willie five days out of six, should nevertheless have the audacity to correspond with him; but that she should write such things as could not bear the light and had to be concealed in cypher was indeed intolerable. Granting her premises, there was certainly ample cause for the indignation that mantled to her very forehead, and the bitterness that took possession of her very soul.

As she stood with one hand on the table, for her limbs trembled with the agitation that shook her mind, she heard the front door softly closed, and a hurried footstep in the passage. It was William Henry, who had remembered, no doubt—too late—that he had left the letter exposed to view, and had returned to place it in some safer receptacle. The next moment he was face to face with her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CYPHER.

'I KNOW what you are come for,' said Margaret in a broken voice, which had yet no touch of tenderness in it. 'You are come for this letter.' She snatched it from the drawer and held it before him. 'It is no use to lie to me; your face tells me the truth.'

William Henry's face was indeed white to the lips; his eyes returned her gaze with a confused and frightened stare. He stammered out something, he knew not what, and sank into a chair.

'What,' continued the girl, in harsh, pitiless tones, 'have you nothing to say for yourself? Has your ready tongue no excuse to offer for this new duplicity?'

'Have you read the letter?' he inquired hoarsely.

'No; how could I?'

The colour rushed back to his cheeks, and into his eyes there came a gleam of hope.

'No,' she went on, 'it is you who shall read it to me. If you decline to do so, I shall conclude that this vile creature has written you what is not fit for anyone, save women like herself, to hear, and your refusal will be the last words that you will ever address to me with my consent, so help me Heaven.'

Mrs. Powell herself, when personating some heroine of the stage, never looked or spoke with greater earnestness of purpose than on this occasion did simple Margaret Slade out of the simplicity of her nature.

'I will read you the letter, Margaret,' was William Henry's quiet reply.

His words, and still more his tone, staggered Margaret not a little. The change in his face and manner within the last few minutes had indeed been most remarkable. At first he had seemed so struck with the consciousness of

guilt, and so hopeless of forgiveness, that he had not dared to throw himself upon her mercy. Then he had appeared to recover himself a little; and now he was quite calm and composed, as though all apprehension had passed away from him.

His voice as he said 'I will read you the letter, Margaret,' had even a tender reproach in it, as though he, and not she, were the injured party.

'Read it,' she said; but her tone was no longer stubborn and imperious. It was plain that this woman's letter was not a love-letter, or he would not have consented to read it; and if it was not a love-letter, what cause had she for anger? And yet, if it was not so, why had he exhibited such confusion—nay, despair?

'I will read it, since you wish it,' he went on, 'though it is a breach of confidence. It is better to break one's word than to break one's heart.'

The morality of this aphorism was somewhat questionable, but Margaret nodded assent. She took it, no doubt, in a particular sense. It was certainly better that she should know the worst than that any proviso of a designing woman, made for her own wicked convenience, should be respected.

'It is well to begin at the beginning,' continued William Henry. 'Be so good as to look at the address of that letter.'

She did so with an indifferent air. She could almost have said that she had seen it before, for she recognised it at once as one of those missives of which he had received so many of late.

'Let me draw your attention to the postmark.'

It was 'Mallow: Ireland.'

The letter fell from her hand. Self-humiliation mastered for the moment the happiness of discovering that he had not been false to her after all. It was certainly not with Mrs. Jordan that he was secretly corresponding, and probably with no one of her sex. If Margaret had been an older woman, with a larger experience

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of the ways of men, she might have regretted her misplaced indignation as 'waste;' it might have even struck her that the present mistake might weaken her position if on some future occasion she should have better reason for her reproaches, but she had no thought except for the injustice she had done her lover. She stood before him with downcast head, stupefied and penitent.

'Oh, Willie, I am so sorry!'

'So am I, dear; sorry that you should have so little confidence in me; sorry that you should have thought me capable of carrying on, under the roof that shelters you, an intrigue with another woman. This letter—and I have received others like it—is from Reginald Talbot.'

'But, Willie, what *could* I think?' she pleaded humbly, 'and why should you write to Mr. Talbot in cypher? And why, when I charged you falsely—with—what—you have mentioned—did you look so—so guilty?'

'Say rather so hurt and shocked, Margaret,' he answered gravely. 'It was surely only natural that I should be shocked at finding the girl I loved so distrustful of me.'

'I was wrong, oh, very, very wrong; and yet,' she pleaded, 'I erred through love of you, Willie. If I had not cared for you so much—so very much—I should not have been so unreasonable.'

'You mean so wild with jealousy,' he replied, smiling. 'However, it's all over now,' and he held out his hand for the letter which she still retained.

'Please to read it to me,' she said; 'a few words will do.'

His face grew pale again, as she thought with anger.

'Why so?' he replied. 'Are you not satisfied even now?'

'Yes, yes; it was foolish of me, I know, but I said "So help me Heaven."'

'Oh, I see. For your oath's sake. That is what Herod said to the daughter of Herodias. It is not a good example to follow.'

He spoke stiffly, but she shook her head.

'I only ask for a few words, Willie.'

'But Talbot writes to me in confidence; about matters that only affect him and me. There is not a word that concerns you in it.'

Still she shook her head. The girl was truth itself, not only in the spirit but in the letter. She had sworn not to speak with him unless he did a certain thing, and though the reason for his doing so no longer existed, her oath remained. Her stubbornness evidently annoyed him. Their parts in the little drama had as it were become reversed. The wrong-doer had become the injured person, and *vice versâ*.

'The facts are these,' he said slowly. 'Talbot and I, as you know, have a secret in common. He is the only person, save myself, who has seen my patron. What he writes of him and his concerns—that is of the manuscripts—we do not wish others to see. We have therefore hit upon a device to keep our communications secret.'

He took out of the drawer a piece of cardboard exactly the shape and size of ordinary letter-paper, full of large holes neatly cut at unequal distances. He placed it on blank paper, and through the interstices wrote these words:—

'Margaret has done you the honour to take your finnikin handwriting for that of Mrs. Jordan.'

Then he took off the cardboard and filled in the spaces with a number of inconsequent words, so that the whole communication became meaningless.

'Talbot has another piece of cardboard exactly similar to this,' he continued, 'and has only to place it over this rubbish for my meaning to become apparent.'

'It is very ingenious,' said Margaret. It was the highest praise she could afford. Such arts were distasteful to her. They seemed to suggest a natural turn for deception, and she secretly hoped that the invention lay at Talbot's door.

'Yes, I think the plan does me some credit,' said William Henry complacently. 'Well, I have only to lay the cardboard over this letter that so excited your indignation, to get at the writer's meaning.'

Her eyes were turned towards him, but with no fixity of expression; she was bound to listen and to look, but her interest was gone.

'"Why do you not send me a copy of the play?"' he rapidly read. '"One would think it was you only who had any stake in it;"' and so on, and so on. 'I suppose you have no wish to pry further into our little secret?' he added, folding up the letter at the same time.

'I did not wish to pry into it at all, Willie,' she answered sorrowfully; 'I again repeat I am sorry to have mistrusted you.'

'Well, well, let us say no more about it. Let us forgive and forget.'

'It is you who have to forgive, Willie, not I.'

'I don't say that,' he answered gravely; 'but if you think so, keep your forgiveness, Maggie, for next time. Be sure I shall have need of it.'

Here the voice of Mr. Erin was heard calling for Margaret.

'Why do you not bring me the play?'

William Henry held up his finger in sign that she should not reveal his presence in the house to Mr. Erin, and taking the manuscript from a cupboard placed it in her hand.

'Take it him,' he whispered, with a tender kiss.

She kissed him again without a word; the tears stood in her eyes as, the very image of penitence and self-reproach, she made her mute adieu.

It was certainly an occasion on which some men, not unconscious of errors, might have congratulated themselves.

The expression on William Henry's face, however, was very far from one of triumph; it was white and worn and weary.

'Another such a victory,' he murmured, with a haggard smile, 'and I shall be undone.'

He locked the door and threw himself into a chair with an exhausted air, like an actor who, having played his part successfully, is conscious of having done so with great effort, and also that he owed more to good luck than

to good guidance. 'Great heaven!' he muttered, 'what an escape! Suppose she had found the key for herself and read the letter, or even if she had compelled me to do so! She must have heard it all. I could not have invented a syllable to save my life——. What a millstone is this fellow about my neck!' he presently continued, as he tore the letter along and across, and threw the fragments under his feet. 'A copy of the play! No, that he shall never see till the time is past for harm to come of it. A few days more, and all will be safe. I will be pestered no longer with his cursed importunities.'

Then he took the perforated cardboard and tore that likewise into small pieces. 'Now I have burnt my boats with a vengeance,' he added grimly.

Then he rose and paced up and down the room, first rapidly, then slower and slower.

'I am afraid I have been hasty, after all,' he murmured; 'this Talbot is ill to deal with, and suspicious as the devil. If I tell him in what peril his communications have placed me, and that therefore I have destroyed his cypher, he will not believe me, though it is the truth. I must tell him that it has been destroyed by accident, and that therefore I dare not write him what he wishes, and that he will not believe either. If incredulity were genius, then indeed he would be a very clever fellow, but not otherwise. Great heavens! what rubbish he writes, and calls it poetry! No, no, no,' he muttered, with knitted brows, 'not *that*, Master Reginald, at any price. And yet how mad it will make him to find it is not so! He will do me a mischief if he can, no doubt. However, he will know nothing till it is too late. Next Saturday will put me out of the reach of harm. Would it were Saturday, and all were well. That's Shakespeare, by-the-bye, save that he says supper-time. A bad augury—a bad augury. The Ides of March are come, but they have not yet gone.' Here he took another turn up and down the room. 'I wonder whether, with all his knowledge of humanity, *Shakespeare* ever knew a man who suffered like me? I *wonder* whether he sees me now, and know

strange thought indeed, and yet it may be so. Perhaps his great soul, which understands it all, has pity on me. Will *she* pity me? A still more momentous question. Pity is akin to love, he says, when love comes last. If love comes first, will pity follow it? What thoughts could I set down this moment were I in the mood for it! and yet they say I am no more a poet than this Talbot. He a poet! The vain drivelling fool; curse his false heart and prying eyes! I hate him.'

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PLAY.

THE first night of one new play is much the same as that of another, I suppose, all the world over. The opening and shutting of doors, the rustling of silks and satins, the murmur of expectancy, cannot hush the beating of the young author's breast, as he sits at the back of the box and longs, like the sick man, for the morning. Everybody who *is* anybody (a charming phrase, indicating about one-billionth of the human race) is there. Men of fashion and women of wit; gossips and critics; playwriters who have been damned and hope for company in their Inferno; playwriters who have succeeded, with no love for a new rival; the fast and the loose. Lights everywhere, but as much difficulty in finding places as though it were dark; mute recognitions, whispered information ('A dead failure, they tell me.' 'The best thing since the "School for Scandal"'); fashionable titters; consumption with her ill-bred cough; these are things peculiar to all first nights, but the first night of 'a newly discovered play by William Shakespeare' was, as one may imagine, something exceptional.

Malone, of course, had been at work. The public *had been* warned against 'an impudent imposture' in 'a

Letter to Lord Charlemont' (surely the longest ever written) of which Edmund Burke had been so good as to say 'that he had got to the seventy-third page before he went to sleep.' It had been necessary to issue a counter-handbill, and to distribute it at the doors.

'VORTIGERN.

'A malevolent and impudent attack on the Shakespeare Manuscript having appeared on the eve of representation of this play, evidently intended to injure the proprietor of the Manuscript, Mr. Erin feels it impossible, within the short space of time between the publishing and the representation, to produce an answer to Mr. Malone's most ill-founded assertions in his "Inquiry." He is therefore induced to request that "Vortigern and Rowena" may be heard with that candour which has ever distinguished a British audience.'

Opposition handbills were also in circulation, headed 'A Forgery.' The public interest in the play was unprecedented. The doors of Drury Lane were besieged. Within, the excitement was even more tremendous. The house was crammed to the very roof. Many paid box prices though they knew no seats were to be obtained there, for the purpose of getting down into the pit. 'The air was charged with the murmurs of the contending factions.' Nothing was ever heard or seen like it within the walls of a playhouse. In a centre box sat Samuel Erin and Margaret. The antiquary had thought it right that they should occupy a conspicuous position and show a bold front to the world, and she had consented to this arrangement without a murmur, for was it not for her Willie's sake? She looked very pale, however, and when addressed had hardly voice to answer. The vast assemblage in such commotion, the shouts and cries from the gallery, the satirical cries of 'Author! Author!'—though the overture had not commenced—appalled her.

In a small box on the opposite side of the house sat alone a tall handsome man, as pale as she. He had drawn

the little curtain forward, so as to conceal himself from the occupants of the house, and kept his face, which wore a look of great distress, turned towards the stage. Through the folds of the curtain he had stolen one glance at her as she took her seat; but afterwards he had looked no more at her. In the next compartment was another and younger man, who also seemed to have a personal interest in Margaret Slade. His box was full of spectators, but he sat at the back of them, and, unseen by her, fixed his eyes upon her from time to time with a searching expression. When the play began, however, he listened to it with the most rapt attention—not a word escaped him—and with every word his face grew darker and more malevolent.

Behind the curtain opinion was almost as much divided as before it. Kemble was in his grimmest humour; disinclined, as many said, both then and afterwards, to give his Vortigern fair play. Some of the inferior actors, taking their tune from him, certainly abstained from exerting themselves, and even made no secret beforehand of their design to abstain. It was a play cumbrous in construction, and even in the very names of the dramatis personæ, such as Wortimerus and Catagrinus; but it had been accepted by the management, and the company, as it was afterwards urged, and with justice, should have done their best for it. Mrs. Powell and Mrs. Jordan vied with one another in encouraging William Henry, who remained all the evening behind the scenes. The former made a magnificent Edmunda; the latter, of whom the greatest of our dramatic critics writes, 'Delightful Mrs. Jordan, whose voice did away with the cares of the whole house before they saw her come in,' surpassed herself. If beauty and vivacity could have saved the piece she would have saved it, single-handed. There was a great deal of opposition, but at first the play went fairly well. The swell and roll of its sonorous lines hid their lack of ideas, and in a fashion supported themselves unaided.

'We are safe now, the "Vortigern" will succeed,

Henry,' said Mrs. Jordan cheerfully, as she left the stage at the close of the second act.

William Henry did not answer; his face, pale and haggard as it had been throughout the evening, had suddenly assumed a look of horror.

'What is the matter with you, lad?' exclaimed Mrs. Powell. 'You would make a good actor, but a very bad author; you could not look more desponding if the play was your own. It is going all right; you must not mind a hiss or two.'

'I fear him,' whispered William Henry hoarsely. 'That is his hateful voice; it is all over.'

The two ladies looked at one another significantly; they had seen young fathers of promising plays on first nights before, but here was a mere godfather worse than any of them. They thought that the young fellow had taken leave of his wits.

'I tell you it is all over,' continued the wretched youth; 'he has come here to damn me.'

'If you mean the devil, that is nothing new,' said Mrs. Powell; 'he is always, so we are told, in the playhouse.'

She spoke very sharply; she thought it the right remedy to apply under the circumstances, just as she might have recommended bending back the fingers in an extreme case of hysterics.

'Come here,' said Mrs. Jordan, leading the young man to a spot where, through a chink in the curtain, they could get a view of the box where his father and cousin sat. 'Look at your Margaret yonder; she is not a coward like you.' Indeed, the more the people hissed, the calmer and the more indifferent Margaret seemed to be, though under that unmoved exterior she suffered agonies. She was thinking of her Willie, though she could not see him, and love enhanced her beauty.

It was a frightful scene of turmoil, though up till now a good-natured one. The actor who had last left the stage (or rather who was left upon it, for he had been killed in combat) had had, by some mismanagement, the curtain

dropped upon his legs, and had jumped up and rubbed them before the audience in a manner very unbecoming a corpse. At this they screamed with laughter, to which his Highness the Duke of Clarence, in the royal box, contributed his full share. Their good humour was, therefore, for the present, assured, though such mirth was hardly conducive to the success of a tragedy. But at the commencement of the next act there were signs of ill-nature. There were cries set agoing from a box on the upper tier, of 'Forgery! forgery!' and even of 'Thief Erin! Thief Erin! look at Thief Erin!'

Kemble's magnificent voice alone could make itself heard above these sounds of displeasure. He was apostrophising the King of Terrors:—

> O sovereign Death,
> Who hast for thy domain this world immense:
> Churchyards and charnelhouses are thy haunts,
> And hospitals thy sumptuous palaces;
> And when thou wouldst be merry thou dost choose
> The gaudy chamber of a dying king.
> And then thou dost ope wide thy monstrous jaws,
> And with rude laughter and fantastic tricks
> Thou clapp'st thy rattling fingers to thy side;
> And when this solemn mockery is o'er——

Here he was suffered to proceed no further; that unfortunate line, uttered in the most sepulchral tone, was the signal for the most discordant howl that was ever heard within the walls of a theatre. He repeated the line with his own peculiar emphasis, and even, as a spectator tells us, 'with a solemn grimace.' It was the death-blow of the piece. A scene of confusion ensued which beggars description. Suddenly, and as the newspapers of the day said, 'without any premonition,' a rush was made for the box occupied by the Erins. Fortunately, however, one man at least had premonition of it. He was the one who has been mentioned as occupying a box by himself. He had been silent all the evening, taking no part either with the partisans or the opponents of the play, but with eyes ever attentive to what was going on. The voice of the

young fellow in the next compartment had attracted him above all others; it had malevolence in it which was wanting in the other cases, and, though he did not recognise it, sounded not unfamiliar to him. It had been the first to raise the cry of 'Forger!' and the only one which had mentioned the name of Erin. As he repeated the words for the third or fourth time, some drunken fellow hiccuped 'Where are they?' To which the malevolent voice replied, 'I'll show you. The young scoundrel is hiding behind the curtain, but we'll have him out.'

The next moment the corridor was full of an excited rabble, led by Reginald Talbot. They ran in their stupid fury at full speed, but not so fast as Frank Dennis would have run could he have got free of them. He had dashed from his box the instant he had heard Talbot's vengeful cry, but it had already raised the wilder spirits of the house, and they had rushed out from this door and that, and interposed themselves between him and their leader. He beheld already Margaret surrounded by this wild and wanton crew, the old man maltreated, and William Henry, evidently the object of this fellow's hatred, torn to pieces. He ran with the impetuous crowd, parting them like water left and right with his broad shoulders, till he gained a place among the foremost. Talbot, leading by a few paces, had reached a spot where two staircases met; the one a narrow one, leading straight down to a few boxes, in one of which Margaret was seated, the other a broader flight, which led to one of the exits of the house. Talbot, wild with haste and rage, cast a glance behind him to point out to his followers the right direction to take, when he met Dennis's eye, and strove to turn and speak. But ere he could do so Frank's strong fingers were on his neck, and impelled him forward, like the wind, to the top of the broader stair. The others, who knew not what had happened, thought that they were still following their leader to their destination, and ran on full pelt behind them. Ere the third step was reached, half a [illegible] had fallen *headlong*, and half a score

and groans mingled with the cries of those who still pushed on behind, but Reginald Talbot neither spoke nor fell. The fingers that had closed about his neck clutched his throat also, while at the same time they kept him up, though his legs used a speed which they had never before attained to; they took their four and even five steps at a time. Fortunately for him, and perhaps for his custodian also, the great door at the foot of the staircase was open to the street, and when they reached it Frank simply let his companion go, who, bereft of sense, though by no means of motion, fell face foremost, with the most frightful violence, into a mud-heap. A friendly pillar brought Dennis himself to anchorage, who then quietly turned and entered the theatre by another way.

Thanks to his presence of mind and strength of body, the house was now freed of its more dangerous elements, and an attempt was being made to finish the play, though almost in dumb show. Mrs. Jordan, though greatly agitated, had even the courage to speak the epilogue, and for the first time found her graces and witcheries of no avail. Margaret would have stayed to say a few words of love and confidence to William Henry, but Mr. Erin hurried her away.

'It was a planned thing,' he kept murmuring on the way home in the hackney coach. 'There was a plot to damn the play; that devil Malone was at the bottom of it.'

But Margaret was not thinking of Malone, nor even of the play, concerning which, though she heard them not, there were reports, besides its failure, of misadventure and even death. She was thinking of Willie, and why he did not come home to be comforted. The two sat down alone to supper, of which neither could touch a mouthful; the antiquary full of woeful thoughts, the girl with only one question in her mind, 'Why does he not come?'

The maid thought she had seen him at the door when her mistress got out of the carriage; there was certainly some young man with his hat pulled over his eyes, who had watched her into the house, and having, as it seemed,

assured himself of her safety, had walked away. It was possible of course that this might have been Willie, but whither had he gone?

'It is no use your waiting for William Henry,' said the antiquary roughly; 'why don't you eat?'

She noticed that her uncle no longer spoke of 'Samuel,' and the change jarred upon her feelings, already strained and tried. It was no fault of Willie's that the play had not succeeded, and it was cruel to visit such a misfortune upon his innocent head.

'It is only natural that I should be anxious about him,' she returned, with some touch of resentment.

'Pooh, pooh! why should you be anxious? He is no doubt supping with one of the players.'

His indifferent words struck her like a blow at random. Was it conceivable, after what had happened that evening, that Willie should prefer the society of another to her own? Above all, was it possible that that one should be Mrs. Jordan? She could not but notice how Flavia had fought for the play, and had hardly known whether to admire or detest her for it. If she had been in her place, and could have done it, she would have fought for it too, but then she would have an adequate motive. Why should that woman have dared so much for it when the others had performed their parts in so sluggish and perfunctory a manner? It must have been because she had her heart in it. And who could have their heart in a mere stage-play, a thing at the best full of fictitious woes and imaginary heroes? There must have been human love—or what such creatures took for love—to have enlisted her in its cause. Oh, why did not Willie come?

As the night wore on apprehensions for her lover's personal safety took the place of these jealous fears. What might not despair and disappointment have induced him to do? In her wretchedness and need of sympathy and consolation, she ventured to hint at this to Mr. Erin.

'It is surely very odd, uncle. Willie [illegible]

home by this time at all events. Should we not send somewhere?'

'What nonsense! Whither should we send, and why? The lad is old enough to take care of himself.'

'But perhaps in his dejection and—and—misery, uncle, he might not have any care of himself.'

'Tush! he is not of that sort. He has much too high an opinion of his own value to throw himself away—into the river, for instance. That such an idea should have entered your mind, however, shows what an unstable fellow you think him; and in some ways—though not in that way—he *is* unstable. He is but a boy, after all, and a spoilt boy. I take blame to myself that I suffered him to entertain the delusion that he was fit to take to himself a wife. It was conditional indeed upon certain contingencies which have not taken place, so that the whole affair is null and void.'

'Uncle!' Margaret rose from her chair, and with white face and flashing eyes confronted the old man.

'Of course it's null and void,' he went on, flattening the tobacco in his pipe with its stopper, and affecting an indifferent air. 'A bargain's a bargain, though indeed, as I have said, it is one that I should never have entered into in any case, but the mere vulgar question of ways and means now puts an end to the matter. Of course he looked for material results from the "Vortigern." It will now not keep the stage another night, while the publication of the play is rendered worthless. It is not his fault, of course; I don't blame him. It is not in mortals to command success. There is nothing for him now but to return to the conveyancing business; and in ten years or so there is no knowing but that he may step into old Bingley's shoes.'

'And I?' cried Margaret bitterly. 'What am I to do? To wait for him?'

'Certainly not; that would be hopeless indeed. The best thing you can possibly do just at present is to—I shall make arrangements for his lodging elsewhere out of harm's way—is to begin to forget all about him.'

'Forget him—forget Willie? How can I?'

'By thinking of somebody else,' returned the antiquary coolly: 'that I have heard is the best way. At all events, it will have to be done.'

'Do you think then a woman's heart is like a seal, uncle, on which an image is impressed, and which, held to some fierce flame—as mine seems to be, Heaven help me, this moment—it straightway becomes a blank ready for the reception of another image? Oh, no, no! I will wait ten years for Willie if it be necessary, but I will never forget him.'

'He'll forget *you* in half the time,' was the dry rejoinder.

'You speak falsely as well as cruelly, uncle,' said Margaret passionately.

There had been a time when even passion could not have nerved her to speak so boldly to the antiquary; and there had been a time when if she had dared to do so the old man would have put down his foot upon such passion and crunched the sparks out. But just now Margaret was too full of her misery and the sense of wrong to care what she said; while her uncle, on his part, though he was fully resolved to put an end to his niece's engagement with William Henry, could not at once resume the relative position to her he had occupied before it was mooted.

'As to my speaking falsely concerning William Henry's fidelity,' he answered quietly, 'time alone can prove that; and there will be certainly plenty of time: while as to cruelty, I really cannot accuse myself of having been cruel.'

'What! when you have allowed the mutual love between your son and me for months to ripen without censure? When you have heard him call me his own ten times a day, and never reproved him for it? When you have thrown us together and left us together? And now because something has not succeeded, of the success of which you made sure, do you wish to tear us asunder and bid us forget one another? And then, oh shame! do you dare to say you are not cruel?'

The old man made

pricked him in the matter, or perhaps he perceived that it was useless to argue with her in her present excited state.

'Have you any fault to find with Willie?' she continued reproachfully. 'Has he not done all he could do in this unfortunate affair? What has happened to the "Vortigern" that he could help or hinder? Do you suppose he has deceived you because it has not succeeded?'

'Of course not,' put in the antiquary testily: 'the boy is honest enough, no doubt; but one must look at things from a reasonable point of view. Come, come, we can talk of these things to-morrow. It is getting late. Let us to bed.'

She answered not a word, but sat with her face bowed down on the table and hidden in her hands, while he took up his candle and left her. She remained in the same position for many minutes, when suddenly there came a gentle knock, a mere tap, at the front door. She was on her feet in a moment, with her long hair loose behind her ears, listening. It was not Willie's knock, she knew, but it might be news of Willie. The clock on the mantelpiece had just struck two. Then came the tap again; this time a little more distinct. It was evident that her uncle had not heard it, and the servant had long gone to bed. There were many bad characters abroad in the street in those times, restrained by a very inefficient constabulary, but Margaret did not hesitate to obey this second summons. She went to the door and undid the fastenings without making the least noise.

A woman stood on the step, to judge by her figure a young one, but her face was hidden in her hood.

'You are Margaret?' she said, in clear sweet tones mingled with an ineffable pity.

'I am,' she answered, with a dreadful fear at her heart. She felt that some messenger of evil tidings stood before her.

'I thought so; I felt sure that you would be sitting up *for him*,' murmured the other softly.

'Where is he? Is he ill? Why does he not come *home*?' gasped Margaret.

'He is not ill, but he cannot come home. Let me in, and I will tell you all.'

With a gentle pressure, for Margaret's instinct was to oppose her, the visitor made her way into the house. 'Let me see you quite alone,' she said; 'somewhere where we cannot be interrupted. I have news for your private ear —I am sorry to say, bad news.'

'And who are you?' Margaret's voice was antagonistic, almost defiant. She resented this woman's coming beyond all measure, but the fear within her compelled her to listen to what she might have to say.

'I am Mrs. Jordan,' was the quiet reply.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MESSENGER OF DISGRACE.

Those words, 'I am Mrs. Jordan,' were not unexpected by Margaret. There was no need for her visitor to speak them or to throw back her hood; she had known her from the first. Whatever evil news there was to tell, it was made ten times worse by the messenger that brought it. She felt like Antony's wife in the presence of Cleopatra. 'You have been his ruin,' were the words that trembled on her lips. But there was something in the other's tone that prevented their utterance. That it was a beautiful face was nothing; she detested and abhorred its beauty. That it was full of sympathy and compassion was nothing; she resented its compassion as an insult. But there was also sorrow in it, genuine and unmistakable sorrow. Whatever wrong this woman had done her—so Margaret reasoned—she had repented of; perhaps had come to confess, when it was too late, but still to confess. There were tears in her eyes; she was an actress, it is true, but they were real tears.

'*Well*, what is it you want, madam?'

'Nothing. I am here on your account, not on my own.'

'And Willie sent you?'

She uttered this with great bitterness, experiencing the same sort of satisfaction in the humiliation it cost her, as some persons in physical pain derive from the self-infliction of another pain.

'He did not send me: he does not even know that I am here.'

'But you come from him. You have been with him after he left the theatre?'

'Yes, for hours; two long miserable hours.'

'And you dare to tell me that?'

'Yes. Oh, Margaret—for that is the only name I know you by—put away from you, I beseech you, all thoughts that wrong him. He has sins enough—Heaven help him—to answer for, but not such as you would impute to him. He is faithful to you, and despairing.'

'What do you mean? Why should he despair?' The other's words had somewhat disarmed her; the gentleness and pity in her companion's looks had won upon her in spite of herself. The woman was certainly not there to exult over her. It was a bitter reflection that her lover had not come straight to her; that he had sought a go-between (and such a go-between!) to speak for him. But that sad word 'despairing' altered matters in other respects. What Willie in his modesty and self-denunciation doubtless feared, was not only that Mr. Erin would stick to the letter of his agreement respecting his consent to his son's marriage (which, indeed, he had just announced his intention to do), but that she herself would assent to his change of views; that the idea of waiting, probably for years, until William Henry should have made sufficient means upon which to marry, would be abhorrent to her; that, in a word, her love for him did not comprehend hope and patience. It was possible, indeed, that his omission to come in person arose from delicacy of mind, and the disinclination to embarrass her by a personal appeal;

and as for his choice of an intermediary, he had perhaps but poured out his woes into the ears of the first person who had professed to sympathise with them, and who, it must be confessed, had shown him kindness. And yet how mistaken the dear lad had been in supposing for a moment that mere misfortune—the ill success of the play—could cut the bonds that bound her heart to his! It had had an effect indeed, but it was only to strengthen them; for when the object of a woman's love is in adversity, he becomes the more dear to her in proportion to the difficulties by which he is surrounded. Since his love was as genuine as her own, he ought indeed to have known as much. And that he should despair of her! Well indeed might she ask with much amazement, 'What do you mean? Why should he despair?'

But Mrs. Jordan's pretty face only grew more grave and sad.

'I wish to Heaven, my dear girl,' she said, 'that I could use another word. If you knew the pain it costs me to come here and see you face to face, and tell you what I have to tell, you would pity me—if you shall presently have any pity to spare, save for your unhappy self and your still more wretched Willie.' The earnestness and fervour of her tone, and its solemnity, which seemed to prepare the way for the revelation of some overwhelming misfortune, made Margaret's blood run cold.

'You said that he was not ill,' she murmured hoarsely, 'and yet he has not come home. He is not dead? Oh, tell me that my Willie is not dead!'

'He is not dead, Margaret, but there are worse things that happen to those we love than death. Worse things than even when you thought the worst of your Willie and of me.'

'Great heaven, how you terrify me! Tell me what has happened in one word.'

'That is impossible, or, if it were possible, you would never, without proof, believe [illegible]

beginning. You kn

failure of the play; the peril only just averted, that threatened your uncle and yourself.'

Margaret shook her head, not so much in denial as in indifference. 'What mattered anything that had threatened herself, even though the menace had been carried out?'

'Is it possible that you are unaware of your escape to-night? How the rioters, led by an enemy of you and yours, were rushing to your box, when some young fellow threw himself between it and them; how he seized their leader by the throat, at risk of his own life, and threw him down the stairs, and how all the rest of them came tumbling after him?'

If the actress hoped to lead her companion's mind into other channels, to interest her for one instant in any subject save that supreme one in which her whole soul was wrapped, her endeavour failed.

'But Willie?' murmured Margaret impatiently. 'Why do you speak of anything save Willie?'

'That will come soon enough. Too soon, dear girl. I must needs tell you it as it all happened. He was behind the scenes, you know, throughout the evening. At first, things seemed to be going pretty well in spite of the opposition; but he was never very hopeful, even then, as he afterwards told me. The greatness of the reward which would be his in case of the success of the play—that is, his claiming you for his own—oppressed him; it seemed too high a fortune even though he had felt himself to be deserving of it.'

'He *is* deserving of it, and of better fortune,' put in Margaret quietly.

Mrs. Jordan took no notice of the interruption. 'He seemed depressed and downhearted from the first,' she continued, 'though Mrs. Powell and myself said all we could to encourage him. Presently, amid the tempest of disapprobation, he recognised a particular voice—the voice of an enemy; of the same person, I have no doubt, who urged on the mob to your box. From that moment

he seemed to give up all hope. "That man is come to ruin me!" he said; and he spoke the truth.'

"It was Reginald Talbot,' exclaimed Margaret suddenly. 'Frank always warned Willie against him. The vile, treacherous wretch!'

'Yes, it was Reginald Talbot—a base creature enough, no doubt; but honest people, Margaret, are not ruined by anything the base can say or shout. We must be base ourselves to enable them to ruin us.'

Margaret rose from her chair. 'I do not understand you, Mrs. Jordan. I thought that you were speaking of my Willie.'

'Listen, Margaret. Keep calm and listen; I would give half of what I have in the world to spare you, but it must be told.'

'I will hear no evil of Willie.'

'You shall hear, at least, nothing that has not fallen from his own lips. When he showed such fear of his enemy, I reproached him for his lack of courage, and through a gap in the stage curtain pointed you out to him as you sat in your box, exposed to all those shouts and jeers, and apparently unmoved by them. But the sight of you only seemed to depress him still more.

'"That is the last I shall see of my Margaret," he said: "I have lost her for ever." And again he spoke the truth.'

'He did not,' cried Margaret vehemently; 'he only thought he spoke it. He imagined because the play had failed that I should give him back his troth. But what is the play to me? My heart is his; I can wait for him. We are still very young; what need is there for despair?'

'That is what I thought, that is what I said,' returned Mrs. Jordan pitifully, 'because I was in the dark, as you are. I said, "It will matter nothing to Margaret if she really loves you; you will still be the same to her."

'"No, I shall not," he answered; "I can never be the same to her. [illegible] to-morrow, if not to-

morrow, the next day, that villain yonder will unmask me; she will know me for what I am, and loathe me."

'I had to leave him then, to speak the epilogue, and when I returned he looked like one who had utterly lost heart and hope. No one troubled himself about him. Mrs. Powell had gone away, and the others departed, cursing the play and all who had had any hand in its production. I dared not leave him to himself, and besought him to go home at once. "I have no home," he said; then I took him to my own house.'

'That was good of you,' murmured Margaret, pale as death.

Then Mrs. Jordan knew that the worst was over; that what she had to tell, however sad and terrible, would fall upon ears prepared to hear it. And yet even now she could not tell her right out, 'Your Willie is a cheat and a liar.'

'In the carriage the poor fellow sat like a dead man, huddled in one corner, without speech and motion; but once within doors, I insisted on his taking some wine, which revived him a little. "You cannot stop here," I said, speaking to him as severely as I could, for kindness only seemed to unnerve him; "I will send out and get you a bed at some inn. But if it will be any comfort to you to relieve your mind, I am ready to hear whatever you have to say." He made a movement towards his breast-pocket which filled me with apprehensions. "If you have a pistol there," I said, "give it to me at once. Whatever you may have done, however you may have wronged Margaret, you will surely not add self-slaughter to your other sins? You will not break her heart by killing yourself?"

'"No, no," he murmured; "it is not that."

'I found it was impossible to get any connected narrative out of him, so I put a question or two.

'"Who is this enemy of yours, and why should it be *in his power* to harm you?"

'"*Because* he knows my secret—my shameful secret.

His name is Reginald Talbot, and he was at one time my friend. We quarrelled about some poems of his, and from that moment he has done his best to ruin me. He tried to prove that I had forged one of the Shakespeare papers, and failed in it; he pretended to be satisfied at the time with the evidence in the matter, as the others were, but from that moment he dogged my footsteps. He is a sneaking, prying hound.

'"One day, when I was at work in my chambers, forging manuscripts, I saw his face at my window; he had climbed up to it by a ladder, and perceived what I was about. There was no hope of concealment any longer, so I unlocked the door and let him in. I told him all—it is a long story, but it is written here (again he touched his breast-pocket), and besought him to have mercy upon me. His heart was like the nether millstone, as I knew it would be. He asked me with a sneer what I should do now, and whether I had any new treasure of Shakespeare's with which to enrich the world. I told him of the 'Vortigern,' which I was then projecting, but which, of course, it was now in his power to put a stop to. Then he proposed a compromise. He was very vain of his verses, and he undertook, upon condition that he was allowed to write some portion of the play himself, to keep silence upon the matter. He had the same mad desire that I had, that the world should take his poetry to be from Shakespeare's pen. I consented of course, for I had no choice. All his wrath against me seemed to have evaporated at once. He was intensely pleased; and from that time we worked together. Moreover, when the committee appointed to decide upon the genuineness of the Shakespeare manuscripts hesitated to accept them because there was no other witness to their discovery save myself, Talbot came forward, as we had agreed that he should do, and deposed that he had seen my patron from the Temple, and the collection from which the paper had been taken. His evidence carried the day and assured me of my position. On the other hand, Talbot wrote so feebly that I felt con-

vinced not a line of his would survive criticism, and, unknown to him, I composed the whole play independently of his assistance.

'"He had to leave London for Ireland, so I had no difficulty in deceiving him in this matter. We corresponded in cypher about it, and I led him to imagine that the 'Vortigern,' as accepted in Drury Lane, was the play that we had composed together. I thought if it were successful that I should be in a position to defy him, and that only those who were already my enemies would believe his story. He had told me that it was impossible for him to be in London the first night of its performance, and I flattered myself that I was quite safe. The instant I recognised his voice in the theatre I felt that all was over with me. He would find out the absence of his own rhapsodies from the drama; and that I had deceived him, as indeed I had—whom have I not deceived? From that moment my fate was sealed."

'"Unhappy boy!" cried I; "is it possible, then, that you acknowledge yourself to be a forger and a cheat?"

'"I do," he answered; "here is the record of my transgression."

'He took from his breast-pocket this paper, his confession, which, it appears, he always carried about with him; an imprudence which would have been unintelligible in anyone else, but to him who had trodden, as it were, every day on the crust of a volcano, it mattered little. I felt sure at once that this was written for your eye, Margaret, in case of discovery; thus, to the very last, some will say, the straightforward course was the one he was disinclined to take. But let us rather believe that to tell you of his own unworthiness to your face was an ordeal beyond his strength. In vain I represented to him the anxiety and apprehensions which his absence must be exciting at home.

'"I have no home," was his reply. "But think of your *father!*" "I have no father," was his miserable rejoinder; "*But Margaret*; have you no pity for Margaret?"

cannot see her; I dare not see her," was his pitiful cry. So I have come to you instead of him.'

Margaret answered nothing. She sat with the confession in her hand, without sign or word, looking straight before her.

'I must go now,' continued her companion tenderly. 'If I can be of any use, if I can say anything for you—a word of forgiveness with your farewell—he is but seventeen, remember; well, another time, perhaps.' She had reached the door, when Margaret called her back with a pitiful cry.

'Kiss me! kiss me!'

As their lips met, the touch of sympathy, like Moses' wand, drew the tears from that face of marble, whereby, even though she left no hope and the bitter conviction of a wasted love behind her, the messenger of pity knew that she had not come altogether in vain.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE FEET OF CLAY.

It is a terrible thing to be left alone with one's dead, and this might in some sort be said to have been Margaret's case when Mrs. Jordan had departed. Her Willie had become as dead to her; all that was left of him was the shameful record that lay upon the table before her. Never more—save once—was she to see his face again in this life, nor did she desire to do so. She would have shrunk from his hand had he offered it to her, and the touch of his lips would have been contamination. He had obtained her kisses as it were under false pretences, and she flushed with shame when she thought of them. She did not conceal from herself that [illegible] to the very last had been in [illegible] should have come in [illegible] a guilt,

and not have left her a prey to unfounded terrors. It was cowardly and base and selfish. Miserable as she had been on his account an hour ago, she was now infinitely more wretched. It was better to have thought him dead—and honest, than to know he was alive and a cheat. 'He is only seventeen, remember,' had been Mrs. Jordan's words in appeal to her charity and pity, but they found no response in Margaret's bosom. 'One can forgive anything at seventeen,' was her reflection, 'save hypocrisy and deceit.' She forgave him as a very charitable person might forgive a card-sharper; there was no malice nor hatred in her heart against him, but she could never take him to her heart again.

Was it possible, she wondered, that he could have been always base? When he had made that passionate protestation in Anne Hathaway's garden, for example, and besought her only to keep her heart free for him for a little time, to give him a chance of proving himself worthy of her; had he had this hateful plan of fraud and falsehood in his mind even then? If he was not to be believed *then*, if what he said then was not the utterance of genuine love and honesty, what word of man was to be credited? And if he was honest then, when did he begin to lie?

It had been her intention not to read this hateful paper; to commit it to the flames; but a sort of terrible curiosity now urged her to peruse it. She had no expectation of finding in it any mitigation of her lost lover's conduct; any plea for pardon or even for pity. She had no wish to hear what he had to say for himself; only a certain morbid interest in it.

Yet as she opened the manuscript and her eyes fell on the well-known handwriting, they filled with unbidden tears. Great heavens! how she had believed in him! how she had loved him! Nay, how she had sympathised unwittingly with his very frauds, and longed and prayed for their success! *Prayed* for it—the thought of this especially appalled her. She found herself, for the first time, face to face with the mystery of life; with the difficulties of spiritual things. It is strange enough (what

happens often enough) that we should fall on our knees and implore the Divine assistance to avert misfortunes from our dear ones that (if we did but know) have already happened; but that we should implore it (if we did but know) on behalf of falsehood, fraud—with the intent to prosper wickedness! This man, among his other villanies, almost made her doubt of the goodness of God!

The manuscript was voluminous. It was written in the form of a diary, but interspersed with reflections and protestations.

'I protest,' it began, 'that I had no premeditated design or the idea of any continued course of duplicity when my first error—the production of the Hemynge note of hand—was committed.'

'He calls it "an error,"' thought Margaret, with a moan; and indeed the opening remark was the key-note of the whole composition, significant of all that was to come. He had been weak, it avowed, but never wicked; the victim not so much of temptation, but of overwhelming circumstances. 'You know, Margaret——'

This unexpected personal appeal came upon her like a thunderclap; it was as though in that solitary room, and in that solemn hour when night and morning were about to meet, his very voice had addressed her. 'You know, Margaret, what sort of relations existed at that time between Mr. Erin and myself: how, though he permitted me to pass as his son, he was far from having any paternal feelings towards me; that he had no sympathy with my tastes, no interest in my doings, and that he grudged me the cost of my very maintenance. Was it so very reprehensible that, having attempted in vain to gain his affection by the usual road to a father's heart, by diligence and duty, I looked about me for some other way? Knowing his passion for any reliques of Shakespeare, it struck me that I might conciliate him by affecting to discover that of which he was always in search. I do not seek to justify what I did, but there was surely some extenuation?

'To show you how little of settled purpose there was in the matter, I took that note of hand, before presentation to your uncle, to Mr. Lavine, the bookseller, in New Inn Passage, and showed him the document for his opinion. He said it seemed to him to have been written a good many years ago (taking for granted that it was an imitation), but that the ink was not what it should be. He told me that he could give me a mixture much more like old ink if it was my humour to produce the semblance of antiquity, and immediately mixed together in a bottle three different liquids used by bookbinders in marbling covers, and this I always henceforth used. I have applied to him again and again for more ink: a circumstance I mention not only to show the simplicity of the means employed in these so-called forgeries of mine, but also the everyday risks I ran of discovery. Do you think I could have endured such a position had I been merely actuated by the motive I have mentioned? Could human nature have borne it? No, Margaret, I was sustained by a far higher ambition; for a man may strive for a reward unworthily, and even though he is aware that he does not deserve it.'

The calmness of this reasoning appalled Margaret even more by its speciousness than by its falseness. Her instinct, though she knew nothing of these abstract matters, told her that such philosophy was rotten at the core.

'The imitation of that note of hand was a false step, I admit,' continued the writer, 'but it succeeded beyond my most sanguine expectations. It altered my relations with Mr. Erin entirely, which of itself encouraged me to new deceptions; but above all it became a basis on which to build my hopes of your becoming my wife. Hitherto I had loved you, Margaret, passionately, devotedly indeed, but with little hopes of ever winning you. When I obtained that promise from your dear lips in the garden at Shottery, it was not merely with the selfish intention of excluding for a few months from your heart the rival

whom I feared; I believed, as I still believe, that my talents were of a high order, and I thought that at no distant date they would meet with public recognition; that some of that praise, in short, which I have gained under false pretences would have been accorded to my own legitimate efforts. The time during which you promised to keep yourself free for me, however, was now drawing to a close, and I felt that I had not advanced a single step on the road to either fame or fortune. I was madly in love with you. I felt that you were slipping out of the reach of my arms, and the terrible temptation suggested itself to secure you by the means that had already gained me so much in so unlooked-for a manner. If I could only make myself necessary to your uncle by ministering to his ruling passion, perhaps he would give his consent (which otherwise I well knew could never be obtained) to our immediate union. Not greed, I swear it, no, nor even the desire of recognition (though only as it were by proxy) for my genius, was my inducement to persevere in my course;—

> Love only was my call,
> And if I lost thy love, I lost my all.'

It was terrible to Margaret to read such words; they almost made her feel as though she had been a confederate in the delinquencies of this unhappy boy. Terrible, too, was the appearance, under dates, of his particular acts of forgery, each set down in a matter-of-fact and methodical manner, and concerning which the total absence of penitence and self-reprobation was less painful to her than the fallacious self-justification in which he had indulged elsewhere.

'Nov. 2nd.—Love-letter and verses to Anne Hathaway. Five stanzas and a braid of hair. Hair a *gage d'amour* from a young playmate; the silk that bound it had attached the seals to some old deed. It was thickly woven and twisted in some peculiar manner, which I judged would suggest antiquity.

'*Nov. 7th.*—Play!

some worsted thread taken out of some old tapestry in the waiting-room of the House of Lords, where I went to hear his Majesty's speech with Mr. Erin.

'Dec. 2nd.—The Profession of Faith. My most ambitious performance (except the play). I solemnly affirm that but for the praises bestowed upon my good fortune (as it was held) on the previous occasions, I should have hesitated to compose this document. On the other hand, you know, Margaret, how earnestly desirous Mr. Erin always was that Shakespeare should be proved to have been a Protestant; if I could please him in this I thought that my way to his heart would be made easy indeed. Moreover, I had myself the most rooted objection to anything like bigotry or superstition. In penning the Profession I formed the twelve letters contained in the Christian and surname of Shakespeare as much as possible to resemble those in his original autographs, but as for the rest I was only careful to produce as many doubleyous and esses as possible. It was a most simple performance, and executed with so little prudence that (as you remember) the word "leffee" was introduced instead of "leafless." Nor did I take much more trouble with the composition itself. When, therefore, I heard Dr. Warton pronounce such a eulogium upon it—"Sir, we have many fine things in our Church Service, and our Litany abounds with beauties; but here, sir, is a man who has distanced us all"—it is hardly to be wondered at that I was intoxicated with so unexpected a success. It corroborated very strongly the high estimation in which I had always held my talents, and I resolved, since the world would not recognise them in my proper person, to compel it to acknowledge them under another name. If I was not so great as Shakespeare—and indeed I have sometimes believed myself to be so—I had at all events a soul akin to him.'

The inordinate and monstrous vanity of this remark did not escape Margaret's notice, but it did not give her the pain that his other reflections had done; it even

afforded some palliation of his deplorable conduct. The approbation of so many learned men, deceived by a great name, had been evidently taken by him as an involuntary recognition of his own genius, and in a manner turned his head. She tried to persuade herself that he henceforth at least became in some degree irresponsible for his own actions.

'It was about this time,' the confession continued, 'that I was almost ruined by the treachery and malignity of Reginald Talbot, for it was he, you remember, who induced Mr. Albany Wallis to confront me with a genuine signature of John Hemynge. I look upon that as the most dangerous peril I had yet encountered, and, at the same time, the cause of my greatest triumph. It seemed incredible, and no wonder, that I should have produced within the space of one hour and a quarter (including the time spent in going and coming, as was supposed, to the Temple, but in reality to my own rooms at the New Inn) a fac-simile of the other John Hemynge's handwriting, unless it had been a genuine document. By that time I had become an adept in imitation, and could also retain in my recollection the form of letters in any autograph which I had once beheld. I brought back a deed sufficiently similar to the original to set all Mr. Wallis's doubts at rest. It did not, however, satisfy my own mind, and that very evening I executed another deed more carefully, which I substituted for the former one, and which stood the test of all future examinations. From that moment, indeed, save those who had been my enemies from the first, and who probably never would have believed in the Shakespeare manuscripts, even though they had been really genuine, I had no serious opponent, with one exception, and for some reason or another of his own he has never shown himself antagonistic to me.'

There was much more of it; the whole composition of the 'Vortigern' was described, with Talbot's connection with it, just as it had been narrated by Mrs. Jordan. But what [illegible]'s thoughts, and caused

her to refer to it again and again, was that allusion of William Henry's to that one person who, not belonging to the Malone faction, had all along discredited his statements, though 'for some reason or another of his own, he had not shown himself antagonistic.' This was certainly not Talbot, who had shown himself antagonistic enough; nor was it evidently any confidant of the unhappy boy's. It could, therefore, only have been Frank Dennis; he had, she well remembered, always kept silence when the question of the manuscripts was mentioned, and had even incurred Mr. Erin's indignation by doing so. But his nature was so frank and open that she could not understand how he could have tacitly countenanced such a fraud had he been really convinced that it was being enacted. It was curious, considering the great distress and perturbation of her mind, that a matter so comparatively small should have thus intruded itself; but it did so.

Otherwise, as may well be imagined, her thoughts had bitter food enough provided for them. That whole night long Margaret never sought her couch. The revelation of the worthlessness of her lover, made by his own hand, and, what was worse, made in no spirit of penitence or remorse, put sleep far from her eyes, and filled her soul with wretchedness. If the thought that things might have been worse can afford consolation, that indeed she had, for William Henry might have married her. If the play had been successful, and if Reginald Talbot had held his tongue, and indeed if he had not held it—for she would never have disbelieved in her Willie had he not torn the mask from his face with his own hand—she might have become William Henry's wife! The very idea of it chilled her blood. Bound to a liar, a cheat, a forger, by an indissoluble bond for life! Vowed to love, revere, and honour a man the baseness of whose nature she would have been certain to have discovered sooner or later, but in any case too late! She had been saved from that at least; and yet how terrible was the blow that had been inflicted upon her!

Sad it is to be left alone with our dead, how much sadder to be left alone, after they have died, with the revelation of their baseness, to find our love has been wasted on an unworthy object, our reverence paid to a false god! In Margaret's case matters were still worse, for she could not even keep the revelation to herself; she had not the miserable satisfaction that some bereaved ones have, when they chance upon the proof of a once loved one's shame, of concealing it. It was necessary that she should tell Mr. Erin, and in revealing the fraud of which he had been the victim, what misery was she about to inflict upon him! How the whole fabric of the old man's pride would be shattered to the dust, and how triumphantly would his enemies trample upon it!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BREAKING IT.

As Margaret and her uncle sat at breakfast the next morning—later than usual, as was their wont on Sundays -- scarce a word was interchanged between them. Her pale face and haggard eyes evoked no remark from him, who, indeed, himself looked pale and worn enough. If he had spoken upon the subject of the play it might have been made easier to her to tell him her dreadful tidings. But as it was, she felt herself unequal to the task; she could not break in upon his gloomy thoughts with such black news. She almost hoped, from his set lips and knitted brow, that he suspected something of the truth; otherwise surely, surely, she thought, he would express some anxiety concerning the continued absence of William Henry.

She was, however, mistaken. Where affection is not even the [illegible]s that happen to others

(and much less the apprehensions of them) do not concern us so much as our own material interests.

After a mere pretence of a meal the antiquary produced pen and ink, and proceeded to make some calculations.

In the middle of them arrived Mr. Albany Wallis. His face was even graver than usual, which his host, however, thought natural enough. He took it for granted that he had come upon business connected with the play, the failure of which was sufficient to account for his depression; or his melancholy, perhaps, might have been put on with a view of cheapening the terms that had been agreed upon with his employers. But Margaret felt, the first instant she caught sight of the visitor's face, that he knew all, and did not need that dumb assurance of human sympathy, the close, lingering pressure of his hand, to convince her of it.

'This is a bad job,' said Mr. Erin, with a pretence of briskness. 'I suppose Sheridan will not give the play another chance?'

'Certainly not,' said Mr. Wallis decisively. '"Almeyda" is on the bill for to-morrow.'

'Then there is nothing for it but to settle, and have done with it. It is quite as great a disappointment to me as to the management, I do assure you, and eventually will be as great a loss. I have ordered the paper for the publication of the play, and must needs go on with it. I cannot break faith with the public.'

'You are a man of honour, I know,' said Mr. Wallis gently; 'but for that very reason you must not print this play.'

'And why not, sir?'

'Because it is spurious.'

'That was not your opinion yesterday, Mr. Wallis, nor is it mine to-day. What, because a few scoundrels have bespattered it, and done their best to make it a failure, and succeeded, you call it spurious!'

'Mr. Erin, I entreat you to be calm. I am as sorry

for what has happened as you can be, though not, perhaps' (here he stole a tènder look at Margaret), 'for the same reason.'

'It needs no ghost from the grave to assure me of that much,' replied the antiquary derisively. 'You have your own interests, and those of your employers, to look to, and I have mine. You are here, as I conclude, to pay me the three hundred pounds agreed upon for the play, and half the profits of the first night. The house was full enough, at all events.'

'Yes, it was a good house. Your share of the adventure is a hundred and five pounds exactly. I have therefore to pay you four hundred and five pounds.'

'Very good; I cannot permit any deductions. If it was worth while to discuss the matter, I might on my part reasonably make complaint of the manner in which the play was acted. Kemble never gave it a fair chance. At Covent Garden it would have had more justice done to it, and might have met with a better fate.'

'Then it would have met with a fate that it did not deserve, Mr. Erin.'

'I do not wish to discuss the subject,' said the antiquary curtly. His reply would probably have been much less courteous but for the production of the bills—Mr. Sheridan paid everything in bills—for the amount in question. Bills and bank notes are the best 'soft answers' for the turning away of wrath.

'You misunderstand me altogether, Mr. Erin,' continued the other, with dignity. 'I had no intention, as you seem to have apprehended, of disturbing your business arrangements with Mr. Sheridan, which may be taken as concluded. I am sorry to say I am come here upon a much more unpleasant errand. I am here at the request of your son, William Henry.'

'Ah! I see,' broke in the antiquary, with bitterness; 'his professional adviser. He shall not have one penny more than the share [illegible]
been agreed

Then he turned to Margaret.

'So you have told him my determination of last night, have you, and he meets it by a declaration of war? Let him do as he pleases; but I warn you, hussy, that if once you throw in your lot with his, I have done with you. The money that is his by rights is not much, as you will find, to keep house upon.'

Margaret strove to speak, but her tongue clave to the roof of her month. It was shocking to see the old man's rage, and none the less so because it was so misdirected. If his passion was so aroused by the mere opposition (as he supposed it to be) to his will, how would he take the destruction of his hopes, and the knowledge that he had been made a public laughingstock? Whatever he had been to others, he had been kind to her; and, abhorrent to her as was the crime of ingratitude, she would have been willing to rest under its imputation if by so doing she could have spared him the revelation of the truth.

'Dear uncle,' she presently murmured, with faltering voice, and laying her little hand upon the old man's arm, 'you wrong me in your thoughts; but that is nothing as compared with the wrong which has been done to *you*. All between William Henry and me is over: for the rest of my life I will endeavour to supply his place with you, and to remedy, as far as in me lies, the evil that he has committed against you.'

'What is it? What is she saying? I do not understand,' inquired the antiquary in trembling tones.

'She is telling you the truth, sir,' said Mr. Wallis impressively. 'Heaven send you the strength to bear it!'

'Dear uncle, you have been deceived,' said Margaret, with tender gravity. 'From first to last you have been deceived, as we all have been. The Shakespeare manuscripts, of which you thought so much, are forgeries—every one of them. William Henry has confessed it.'

'You lie, you baggage, you lie!' he cried, with fury.

'I wish I did,' sighed Margaret bitterly.

He did not hear her; there was a singing in his ears that shut out all other sounds.

'So this is the last card you have to play, you two, is it? I am to be frightened into compliance with your wishes; frightened into annihilating common sense, and making two beggars happy! And you, *you*, sir!' he added, turning to Mr. Wallis; 'you are not ashamed to be a confederate in such a scheme as this? These two young fools think it is for their sake, but I know better. You are one of Malone's creatures. Having already failed by fair means to disprove the genuineness of these manuscripts, you have bought over this ungrateful lad to your side. "If you will perjure yourself," you have said to him, "and admit yourself to be a forger, we will see that you do not lose by it; we will give you money—since the old man will not—upon which you and yours can subsist together." Oh, liars and villains!'

It was pitiful to see and hear him. King Lear himself, deserted by his own flesh and blood and invoking heaven's vengeance on them, could hardly have been a more dreadful spectacle.

'Mr. Erin,' said Mr. Wallis gravely, 'if you see me in no way moved by the infamous accusation you have made against me, and even restraining a still more natural indignation at the dishonour your words have cast upon that innocent girl, it is not because I do not feel it; it is because I pity you from the bottom of my heart. That you have been duped and fooled by the falsehood of this unhappy young man is only what has happened to others, myself amongst them; but in your own case the reflection must be infinitely more bitter, since he who wrought the wrong was your own flesh and blood—one who has taken your bread, and bitten the hand that fed him. If you do not believe us, Miss Margaret has his own words for it in black and white.'

Here Margaret drew the confession from her bosom, and laid it on the table beside her uncle; his fingers were

grasping the arms of his chair, and his face was fixed full upon his visitor in hate and rage.

'If you will read it at your leisure,' continued the lawyer gently, 'you will at least have the satisfaction of knowing that, with one exception, no one has had any hand in this shameful fraud save the miserable lad himself; that your niece was as innocent of any knowledge in it, from first to last, as you were: so much even those who have been inclined to suspect you of any connivance in it must needs acknowledge when they read that paper——'

Mr. Erin leaped from his chair with an inarticulate cry of fury, and seizing the confession before him, tore it from left to right, and from right to left, into a hundred pieces.

'Begone,' he cried, 'begone, both of you! Take her with you, I say, lest I do her a mischief; take her to the Perjurer, send her to the devil for all I care; but never let me see her false face again!'

With that he threw himself out of the room like one demented, and after the door had clanged behind him they heard his heavy step, at first at a speed beyond his years, but presently with the tread of exhaustion and old age, creep up to his own room.

'Is it safe to leave him, think you?' inquired Mr. Wallis in a hushed voice. 'Once convinced of the truth, his reflections must be terrible. To be deceived by one's own flesh and blood!'

'William Henry is not his son,' said Margaret quietly: in a time of anguish and distress it is easy to speak of matters which under ordinary circumstances we should shrink from mentioning.

'Thank Heaven for that!' ejaculated the lawyer; 'there is no fear, then, that he will not get over it. What I took for paternal resentment is partly, no doubt, exasperation at the exposure of his own credulity. The only reason for your remaining here after his express commandment to the contrary no longer therefore exists. Your doing so for the present at least will only remind him of

his misfortune and aggravate its bitterness. I have a sister who keeps my house for me, and who will welcome you as a mother; I entreat you to accept of her hospitality, not only for your own sake, but for that of your uncle. Indeed, after the threat he has made use of I must insist upon your accompanying me.'

'I am not afraid for myself; I am sure he will never harm me. Indeed, Mr. Wallis, I cannot leave him in his solitude and wretchedness.'

'He will not be solitary, Miss Margaret. I will drop a hint to Mr. Dennis, whose intention I know it is to call upon him this afternoon, to take up his quarters with him for a while.'

At the mention of Frank Dennis's name Margaret changed colour; the idea of meeting him had suddenly become intolerable.

'If your sister will give me an asylum for a few days,' she hurriedly replied, 'I think I will take advantage of your most kind offer.'

In a few minutes she had made her preparations for departure; she trembled lest there should come a knock at the front door while she was yet in the house. She glanced apprehensively up the little street as she sallied forth on Mr. Wallis's arm, lest some one with eyes that spoke reproof, without intending it, should come across her before she had gained the shelter of another roof. Some one whom she had never estimated at his true worth, or treated as he deserved; some one she had blamed for his coldness and incredulity, but who had suspected all along—she was as convinced of it as of the fraud itself—the deception which had been practised upon her, but whom the nobleness of a nature that shrank from the exposure of a rival had kept silent.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A COMFORTER.

THERE is nothing more astonishing in the history of mankind than the high estimation in which credulity—under the form of belief—has been held by all nations who have had the least claim to be civilised. Yet the vast majority of the human race, mere slaves as they are to custom and convention, imbibing their faith with their mother's milk, and as disinclined to change as a wheel that has found its rut, are absolutely unable to be sceptical. This is probably why persecution has been so lightly permitted—even among Christians, whose connivance at it is otherwise unintelligible; those who suffered for their scepticism were comparatively so few that their martyrdom was disregarded. It is an immense recommendation to a creed, that the mere fact of accepting it is accounted the highest virtue, since ninety-nine persons out of a hundred who have been brought up in it find no sort of difficulty in fulfilling its chief obligation. With the same ease with which the doctrines of Mahomet or of Buddha are embraced by their disciples, had the story of the discovery of the Shakespeare manuscripts been accepted by Mr. Samuel Erin. Nay, he had not been only a disciple, but a devotee. He had been looking forward all his life to some revelation of a similar kind, and it had been manifested under circumstances that not only corroborated his views, but flattered his *amour propre*. A member of his own house had been the discoverer of the MSS., and he himself their apostle and exponent. To confess, even to himself, that he had been preaching a false faith, and been the dupe of a lying boy, seemed impossible. The very idea of it was wormwood to him. Even the discovery that Margaret had taken him at his word and left his roof did not at first shake him. It even strengthened his suspicion that the

whole affair was a trick to catch his consent to her marriage with William Henry. It was only done to frighten him into submission.

But as the solitary hours went by, this obstinate conviction began to slacken; as his indignation grew and grew against the author of his calamity, he began to admit that such a scoundrel might be capable of anything, even sacrilege. It was the affront to the Immortal Bard that he put first, and the offence to himself afterwards. Perhaps William Henry was aware that he was not his son, but he was also aware of the greatness of Shakespeare. And yet, what rankled more was the consciousness that his own intelligence had been trifled with—that he had been made a fool of. It was a subject terrible to think about, and worse to talk about, and yet he longed for sympathy; the solitude of his own thoughts was intolerable to him.

In the afternoon, at the same time he had been wont to appear in the days that seemed to be long past, Frank Dennis arrived. The antiquary seized his hand with a warmth that he had never before exhibited, though he had loved him well, and bade him be seated. The only thing that had ever come between them was this man's disinclination to accept the very facts which he himself was beginning to doubt, and at first this rendered the meeting embarrassing; on the other hand, when once the ice was broken, it smoothed matters.

'Have you heard the new story about William Henry?' he asked in hesitating tones.

'Yes; I wish I could think of it as I did of the old story. It is true, sir, every word of it.'

'You think so?' returned the antiquary, with a forced smile of incredulity.

'I am sure of it,' was the quiet reply.

There was a long silence.

'What proof have you to substantiate your assertion?'

The irony of fate had caused this question to be asked in the very room where proof used to be so constantly in view, and on the wall of which the 'certificate' of

the believers in the Shakespeare documents still hung suspended.

It was met by another question. 'Have you not seen his confession?'

Mr. Erin pointed to the carpet on which the fragments of the document still remained. 'It was placed in my hands,' said he in a hoarse dry voice, 'but I never read it.'

'No matter; it would only have given you pain. I have seen the unhappy lad, and heard the truth from his own lips.'

'The truth!' echoed the old man bitterly.

'Yes, the truth at last. Here is a copy of an affidavit it is his intention to make to-morrow morning before a magistrate. There are things in it which one regrets; the tone of it is unsatisfactory. He does not seem so penetrated with the sense of his misconduct as would be becoming, but at all events he is careful to absolve everyone from complicity in his crime, and particularly yourself. "I solemnly declare," he says, "that my father was totally unacquainted with the whole affair, believing most firmly the papers to be productions of Shakespeare."'

The antiquary's brow grew very dark. 'I will never see that young man's face if I can help it,' he said solemnly, 'or speak one word to him again, so help me Heaven!'

'He does not expect it,' answered the other quietly. Henceforward he will take his own way in the world. After "expressing regret for any offence he may have given the world or any individual, trusting at the same time they will deem the whole the act of a boy without any evil intention, but hurried on by vanity and the praise of others," he goes on to say, "Should I attempt any other play, or work of imagination, I shall hope the public will lay aside all prejudice my conduct may have deserved, and grant me their indulgence." I suppose, therefore, he intends to live by his pen.'

'You mean to starve by it,' answered the old man bitterly. The style of the composition he had just heard struck him as fustian: he had heard it before and ex-

pressed another opinion of it, but then the circumstances were different. In Art and Literature the views of most people are less affected by the work itself than by the name under which it is presented to their notice.

There was a long pause. As in a reservoir, when once its contents have begun to percolate drop by drop through the dam, the drops soon become a stream, and the stream a torrent, and the dam is swept away, so it was with Mr. Erin's obstinacy. The dam was gone by this time, and the bitter waters of conviction rolled in upon his mind like a flood. There was no longer a dry place on it to afford a perch for the mocking-bird of incredulity.

'When was it, Frank,' he inquired in an altered voice, 'when you yourself began to suspect this—this infamous deception?'

'From the very first. You remember giving me the document with the seals attached, that had the quintin upon them? It accidentally fell from my hands, when a portion of the back of one of the seals broke off, and disclosed the inside, which was made of new wax! The—the forger—though he had contrived to cut the old seal without breaking, found it had lost its moisture, so that the slip of parchment which he had introduced into it could only be held by new wax. The next day I perceived that the two parts had been bound together by black silk, which, if anyone had given himself the trouble to untwist, would have made him as wise as I.'

'And yet you held your peace, Dennis,' groaned the old man reproachfully.

'In the first place you would have disbelieved had the proofs of imposture been twice as strong; and secondly—well, there were other reasons, into which it is not necessary now to enter. You are quite aware that I never lent my countenance to the deception; and believe me, Mr. Erin, if I could have saved you from your present humiliation—with honour—I would have done so. It was not possible. I am come here to-day to make what amends are in my power for the wro[illegible] may have done you. Wil-

liam Henry's affidavit will acquit you of all blame in this matter in the eyes of unprejudiced persons, but you have your enemies, and many persons who were your friends'—he pointed to the certificate—'will now join their ranks. For some time, at least, residence in London must needs be painful to you. I had taken a cottage near Bath, intending for the present to dwell there; but circumstances' (here the colour came into the young man's cheeks) 'have altered my intention. I shall now reside in town, and my little country home is at your service; there, out of the reach of malicious tongues, you may reside in peace and quiet as long as you think proper.'

For the first time throughout the interview something like satisfaction came into the old man's face. The notion of escaping from the flouts and jeers of his acquaintances, and from their equally galling silence, was very welcome to him.

'I thank you,' he said, 'with all my heart, Dennis.'

'There is only one condition, sir,' hesitated the other. 'I think the proposition would be more acceptable to—to Miss Margaret—if she did not know that she was accepting any hospitality of mine. You will be so good as to conceal from her that fact.'

'Yes, yes,' assented the old man. He did not like to confess that Margaret was elsewhere; that she had been driven from his roof by his own insensate anger. His companion's offer had touched him and turned the current of his thoughts from their accustomed groove—himself and his own affairs—into other channels. He recognised the patience and forbearance of this young fellow, and the temptation to unmask a rival which he had resisted and left to other hands to do. He was curious to know the full extent to which this self-sacrifice would have extended.

'But suppose matters had gone still further, Dennis? If the play had been successful, and its genuineness acknowledged, and Margaret——'

'It was not possible,' broke in the other, with a flush. 'No one could have read the "Vortigern"—I mean could

have seen it acted,' he added hurriedly, 'and believed it to be a play of William Shakespeare's. I felt confident of that.'

'Still, some of us were deceived,' insisted the antiquary, with a melancholy smile; 'and why not more? Suppose the play had succeeded, the contingency on which, as you know, my niece's marriage with this scoundrel depended, what would you have done then?'

'I should have still kept silence. I only suspected, remember. I was not quite sure. Moreover, Margaret herself might have been spared the knowledge of the truth, and it was not for me to undeceive her.'

'You would have permitted her, then, for a delicate scruple, to entrust her happiness to a scoundrel?'

'You press me hard, sir, though I do not say you have not a right to do so,' replied Dennis, greatly agitated. 'I have thought of this a thousand times; it has cost me days and nights of misery, Heaven knows. But on the whole I have satisfied my conscience. When one has lost all hope in a matter that has once concerned one to the uttermost, one takes a clear view of it. The young man of whom you speak has, doubtless, many faults; he is weak and vain, and greedy of applause, however gained; he is to some extent unprincipled, he has even committed a serious crime; but he is not altogether what you have called him, a scoundrel. He is not unkind; under less adverse circumstances than those in which, from the very first, he has been placed, he would have shown himself a better man. An exceptional temptation assailed him, and he succumbed to it. He would not necessarily—or I have tried to think so—have made a bad husband.'

This speech was uttered with grave deliberation, and the manner of it was most impressive; the speaker might have stood for some personification of Justice, weighing his words with equal hand. Indeed, this man was more than just, he was magnanimous.

The antiquary could not withhold his admiration from his comm[illegible]nts he was wholly able[illegible]

'You are throwing good feeling away, Frank Dennis, he said, 'upon a thankless cur. If you think to move me to compassion for him, you are pleading to deaf ears. He is henceforth as a dead man to me and mine.'

'You will act as you think right, no doubt,' said the young man quietly, 'and I am only doing the same.'

He felt that whatever his own wrongs had been, the wrongs of his companion were far greater. Cajoled, deceived, and stricken in years, his reputation smirched, if not destroyed; humiliated in his own eyes, degraded in those of others; if he did not do well to be angry, it could hardly be said, being human, that he did ill.

Dennis gave the antiquary the address of his cottage, and the necessary information for reaching the spot, and bade him adieu with much emotion.

'But you will not desert us?' said Mr. Erin imploringly. 'If you stand apart from us——' His voice trembled, and he left the sentence unfinished. He not only, as the other guessed, meant to imply that in such a case they would be friendless indeed, but that Dennis's withdrawal from his society would be construed as condemnation.

'If you write to me to come,' he answered, 'if you are quite sure that my presence will be acceptable to you and yours——' and in his turn he hesitated.

'I understand,' said the antiquary gently. 'I shall think of others for the future, as well as of myself, if only' (here he gave a mournful smile) 'to distract my thoughts from what is painful.'

'There is sunshine still behind the clouds,' said Dennis, as he shook hands.

'True, true,' replied the other; then added to himself with a deep sigh, as he closed the door after his visitor, 'for *you*, but not for me.'

CHAPTER XXXV.

FAREWELL.

NOT a single night did Margaret sleep away from her uncle's roof. He went in person to Mr. Wallis's house and claimed her. The apology he had schooled himself to make to that gentleman was stayed upon the threshold of his lips.

'Your face, Mr. Erin, tells me all that I need and more than I wish to hear,' said the kindly lawyer. 'Pray spare yourself and me.'

One unfortunate remark, however, Mr. Wallis made, for which he bitterly blamed himself, though as it turned out, unnecessarily.

The antiquary paid him over that portion of money received from the Theatre which was due to William Henry, and requested him to place it in his hands.

'I will do so,' said the lawyer, 'though, were I in his place, I had rather starve than take it.'

Directly the words were uttered, he perceived their application to the antiquary himself, who was quietly pocketing his own share of the wages of iniquity.

But though we have the same skin, it is of various degrees of thickness.

'He will take it,' said the other dryly, 'and starve afterwards.'

Notwithstanding this deviation of Mr. Erin's from the straight path, it is well to state here that Mr. Albany Wallis never consented—although they were his friends and allies—with those who laid the sins of William Henry upon his father's shoulders. When Bishop Percy, on the authority of the commentator Steevens, observed that the whole house in Norfolk Street was 'an elaborate workshop,' Mr. Wallis contradicted the statement point-blank, and when another traducer went the length of including

Margaret in the indictment by the assertion that a female relative of Mr. Erin's performed the more delicate work of the (forged) autographs, he gave him the lie direct.

The storm, indeed, that burst upon the heads of the antiquary and his belongings was terrible, and fortunate it was for them that they had found an asylum afar off. Most of the 'hailstones and coals of fire' fell short of it; and those that reached them, through the malice of enemies or the officiousness of goodnatured friends, were fended off from the old man by Margaret's watchful care. Upon the whole, indeed, it is doubtful whether those seemingly evil days were not good for her. Her solicitude upon her uncle's account prevented her from dwelling over-much upon her private grief, just as the heartbreak of the widower is sometimes stayed by the cry of the children.

It was many a day, however, before she could look her own misfortune in the face and scrutinise its lineaments, for when we come to gauge our sorrows it is a sign that the deep waters that have gone over our soul have begun to shallow. Notwithstanding her horror of her Willie's crime, she could not forget what he had once been to her, even though she was well aware, from a sure source, that matters were not so with him. Mrs. Jordan had written to her, out of the fullness of one of the kindest hearts that ever beat in woman's breast, to allay her apprehensions about him on material grounds. Though poor enough, he was not in want, nor likely to be so. Without a word of ill-nature, she had also contrived to make her understand that the boy was not inconsolable; he was busy with his pen, and if his genius did not soar, his conceit was upborne on lusty pinions. 'All is Vanity,' said the preacher in disparagement of that attribute; yet he was an author himself, and ought to have known the consolation of such a gift.

One of Mrs. Jordan's letters enclosed a little note from William Henry, which for months Margaret could not bring herself to read. She knew that it required no reply, and must needs bruise the wound that had not yet healed

within her; so it lay in her desk like some mystic jewel which its possessor keeps in her case because it brings ill-luck to the wearer. But when, after long waiting, and without importunity, Frank Dennis obtained permission to visit his own house, she felt it to be her duty to read or burn that note. It was not a case of being off with the old love before she was on with the new, so far as William Henry was concerned, for she had long done with him; but she was conscious of a certain tender curiosity, which, as circumstances were now turning out, might become disloyalty to another, and therefore she resolved to allay it.

She took the folded paper in her trembling hand, like one who takes up earth to scatter on the coffin lid; it was the very last sight she would ever have of aught belonging to him. There was a certain solemnity about those farewell words of his, even though they could not matter much. Perhaps they were not words of farewell; perhaps, in his wild, boyish fashion, they were about to tell her that in spite of his ruin and disgrace, he still loved her, and how, knowing that her heart had once been his, he defied her to cast him out of it. That would be cruel indeed, though it would not alter the course she had marked out for herself. Would it not be better after all to burn the letter?

The next moment she had torn it open and read it. It was dated months ago, within a week, indeed, of the discovery of his shame. 'I have done you a grievous wrong, Margaret; let me now do you one good service. It is but a little word of advice, yet if you knew what it cost me to give it, you would hold it of some value. Frank Dennis is worth a thousand of me and loves you—I cannot bring myself to write with a truer love than mine, for that is impossible—but with a love more worthy of you. Marry him, Margaret, and forget me!'

It could not have mattered much, as has been said. The man was a bankrupt; but still he had given her all he had to give, a quittance.

With Aunt Margaret's fortunes, as apart from the misguided youth who in so strange a manner had almost linked

her lot with his, our story has little to do. My own impression is that she was a happy wife; and it is quite certain that Frank Dennis was the best of husbands. Mr. Erin did not long survive his day of humiliation, though it was not, I think, distress of mind that hastened his end so much (as often happens) as the relinquishment of his old pursuits and favourite studies. When we have ridden a hobby-horse all our lives, it is no wonder that when it is suddenly taken from us we find that we have lost the use of our legs.

Some embers of his old taste for antiquities must still, indeed, have glowed within him, for in those last days he wrote a 'History of the Inns of Court,' with New Inn among them; but it is plain his heart was not in it. Henceforth his favourite volume was a sealed book to him; there were two names—once so frequent on his tongue—to which he never alluded, William Henry Erin and William Shakespeare.

With respect to the former, Frank Dennis maintained a similar reticence for no less than five-and-twenty years. At the expiration of that time, Aunt Margaret received a certain letter, which she placed in her husband's hands without a word.

'Poor fellow!' was his remark when he had read it. 'Well! we must, of course, go up to town.'

William Henry had written from his sick bed to ask to see Margaret once more before he died.

They had lived in the country ever since their marriage, but they set out for London at once.

It was summer-time, the very month in which they had journeyed to Stratford-on-Avon more than a quarter of a century ago, and they talked of that time together without any reserve.

'I think if it had not been for that visit to Bristol,' said Frank thoughtfully, 'that none of this sad business would have happened; it was Chatterton's story that put it into his head.' Margaret nodded sorrowful assent. She

remembered well how the unhappy lad had defended his prototype's conduct.

'It was a miserable crime,' she said, 'and miserably has he suffered for it.'

'That is all we need think of now, Margaret; of that, and of his temptation,' he added tenderly, 'which, as I can witness, was excessive.'

Here was, indeed, a husband to thank heaven for, and she knew it. And yet—and yet—the tears were in her eyes upon another's account. How bright and handsome had her Willie looked as he took his seat by her side at the inn table, on that other journey. How eager had been his face when he had first pressed his suit in Anne Hathaway's garden. In the mist of memory the will-of-the-wisp looms large and twinkles like a very star.

When they reached London, Margaret went alone to the lodging he had indicated; a poor place enough, but with no signs of want about it as she had feared, nor did the sick man lack due tendance. He was very near his end; but his eyes—all that was left of him that she recognised—flashed grateful recognition.

'So good of you, so like you, Margaret,' he murmured.

She sat by him a long time, overwhelmed with pity, but not seldom distressed by his worldly talk. The ruling passion was strong in death. He spoke of his works—of which he had written many in his own name, and of the recognition which he felt assured they would one day meet with; he even told her, with a smile of triumph, that Malone himself had bidden one hundred and thirty guineas for the forged Shakespeare documents. He seemed unable to take a just view of his own behaviour in that transaction, though as to others, he was not only just but generous.

'Dear Margaret,' were his last failing words to her: 'I once gave you a piece of advice, the only thing I had to give—which you did well to follow. I have nothing but the thanks of a dying man to offer you for your having come to bid me farewell, save what I have now to say

—which I well know will be news to you. I have been an unfortunate, as well as a misguided, man; my talents have never been acknowledged, and if I had had to live by my wits alone, I should have starved—yes, starved!' His sharp face darkened, and he raised his feeble hands as if in protest against the judgment of the world. 'There was one man, Margaret, one among all these millions, and he the very last to whom I should have looked for aid, who caused me to be sought out and gave me help. I have lived more or less upon his bounty ever since. He has never told you of it, Margaret; and now there is no need to tell you; you who know him can guess who it is.'

Margaret's tears fell fast; it was touching indeed to hear of her husband's goodness from the lips of his dying rival.

'Frank is very good to me, dear Willie,' she sobbed.

'Yes, yes, I knew it would be so,' he murmured; 'honest and true. What is the breath of the world to him who will not even let it know of his good deeds. Yes, yes—kiss me, kiss me for the last time—worth a thousand of me, Margaret, though he was never the Talk of the Town.'

THE END.

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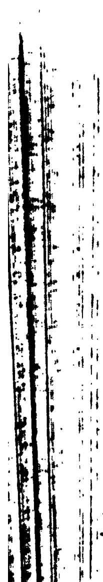

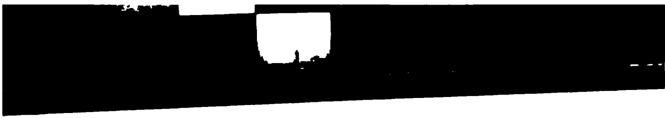

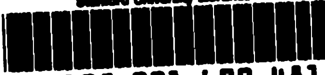

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